



**EMERGE**

Equipping Minoritized and  
Emerging Research Institutions  
to Grow Their Enterprises

# Reaching Out: Best Practices for Contacting Program Officers

A peer-reviewed EMERGE resource from the NORDP  
Consultants Program

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## About the NORDP Consultants Program

The NORDP Consultants Program is dedicated to increasing the diversity of the national research ecosystem by providing research development services to minority-serving institutions (MSIs) and emerging research institutions (ERIs) at no cost to the institution.

The program pairs research development professionals with investigators and research leadership to:

1. Strengthen researchers' capacity to compete for external funding,
2. Enhance research enterprise infrastructure and capacity,
3. Inspire institutional research cultures, and
4. Magnify the visibility and competitive reputation of MSIs and ERIs in the research enterprise.

# Executive Summary

Funding agency program staff, through the projects they select for funding, are also influencing the direction of research in the disciplinary area for which they are responsible. They have a vested interest in promoting the submission of high-quality proposals that fit well with the goals and priorities of the programs they manage. Nevertheless, many investigators - including seasoned researchers with multiple awards - are reluctant to reach out to program staff for clarification about the fit of their ideas with the program's goals, to resolve ambiguities in a funder's guidelines and policies, or to get feedback on a declined proposal, even when doing so would have a significant positive impact on their chances of success. This resource will help both investigators and the research development and research administration professionals they work with to understand when it is - and is not - appropriate to contact program staff, etiquette and best practices for doing so, and how to prepare preliminary documents when needed to help a program officer understand the investigator's research.

This resource serves investigators and the research development and research administration professionals. The goal is to understand:

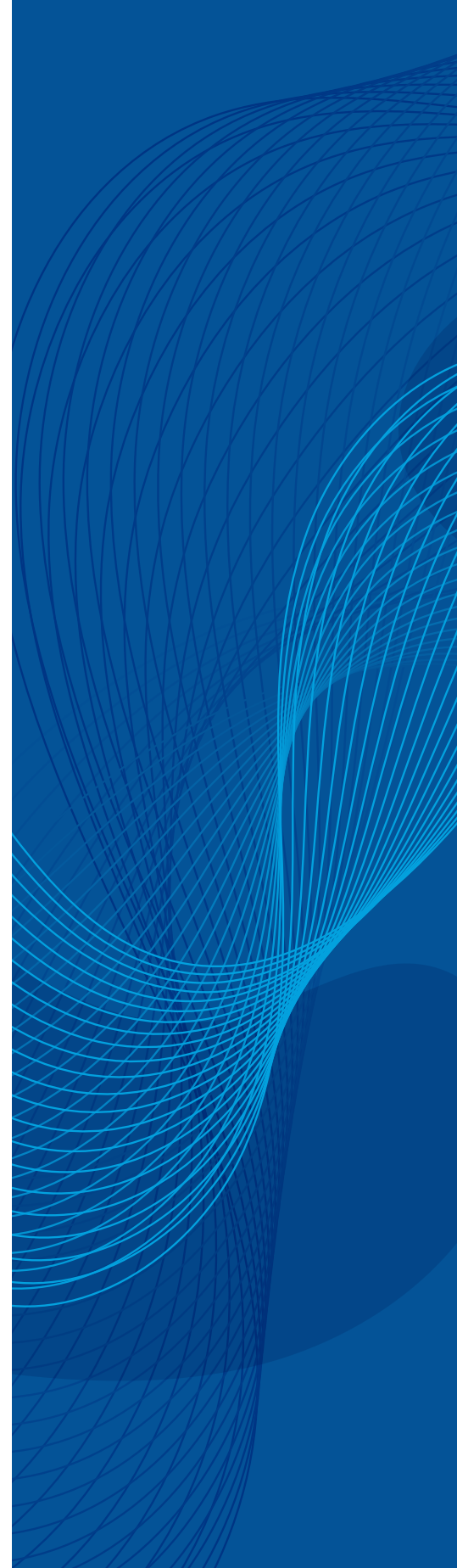
- When it is - and is not - appropriate to contact program staff
- The etiquette and best practices for contacting program staff
- How to prepare explanatory documents (concept outlines, letters of intent/interest (LOIs), preliminary proposals)

## Target Audience

Investigators seeking external funding for their research, scholarship, and creative artistry, and the research development and research administration professionals who assist them.

**Authors' Note:** As we don't know precisely who will be reading our resource, we are making absolutely no assumptions about our audience. Some of our readers may be encountering this information for the first time; others may already be familiar with much of it. We hope that everyone who reads it will find something useful in it.

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## Interacting with Program Officers

Research development and research administration professionals can help investigators answer lots of questions. Some RD professionals have even been proposal reviewers or program staff at funding agencies. There are times, however, when the only way to get a definitive answer is to ask a current program officer. For example, the solicitation for a competition may say one thing, while the general guidelines for that funder may say something that's completely the opposite. There may be multiple funders (or multiple programs within a single funding agency) that look equally appropriate for a specific project, but with no good way of determining which one offers the best chance for a given investigator with a specific project in mind.

In times like that, it's important to get an expert's opinion: and that means contacting a program officer. The problem is, "most scholars and researchers would rather undergo a root canal without anesthesia than call a program officer" (Spires). Investigators have given us many reasons for their hesitation: they don't want to "bother" program staff, they're afraid of appearing inexperienced, they're too busy to reach out, or a previous interaction didn't go as hoped.

Remember, program officers are often researchers in their own right. They're lovely people, and they're eager to talk to investigators - but you need to approach them in the right circumstances, which we'll talk more about below. Not only do they supervise the funder's review process and recommend projects to fund, they're also trying to move the needle - either within a specific discipline or topic area, or in service to their organization's mission, vision, and goals. This means that program officers have a vested interest in helping investigators to understand the rules and the culture of their organization, and to submit high-quality proposals they can recommend for funding - because that's one way to move that needle, and thus meet one of their performance goals. You shouldn't hesitate to contact a program officer when you have a legitimate reason to.

### When Not to Contact a Program Officer

Practical reasons often mean that smaller funders (such as family foundations, community foundations, or professional societies) discourage direct contact—because unlike NSF, the American Heart

Association, or the Spencer Foundation, they may only have one or a few staff members. That small staff is juggling everything from operations to communications: they don't have the time or bandwidth to field inquiries from applicants.

Colleagues (and leaders, like well-meaning department chairs or deans) will sometimes encourage investigators to reach out to their program officer "just to say hello." They mean well, but that's really not the best advice. Keep the interaction on a business or professional level unless you already know the program officer: and even then, you should keep social interactions to social occasions..

The one exception to the "no-social-contact" rule is when you run into a program officer at a workshop, a **conference**, or a professional meeting. If they're there giving a talk about their agency or the program they manage within that agency, that's a business occasion. But you can certainly go up to them after the session, or during a networking or social event that's part of the program, to say hello, hand them a business card (if you have one on you) and have a conversation about any topic that's appropriate for the occasion - including whether or not your research interests are a good fit for the program they manage.

It is perfectly fine to chat, discuss, and converse with program officers at conferences, workshops, and professional meetings during designated social times. Some conferences include a designated "social hour," making it clear that this time is meant for informal networking. It's important to remember, though, that even in casual settings, it's not appropriate to press program officers for information they can't share—like whether your proposal will be funded.

## When You Should Contact a Program Officer

There are plenty of times, throughout the entire project lifecycle when it is either appropriate or mandatory (or both) to contact program staff. Your research development or research administration professional can help you with those questions. In this resource, however, we're focusing on interactions with program staff that happen in the very earliest stages of development - either before a proposal is on the table, or as the proposal development process is ongoing. These are situations when you should contact a program officer - as long as doing that is allowed by the funder in question, and as long as you **observe the rules** of etiquette we'll describe in later.

- You've not previously applied to this funder or funder's program, and you're not sure whether or not your proposed project is a good fit for it;
- Your proposed project could potentially fit well with two or more of the funder's programs, and you're trying to determine which one would be most appropriate (and whether or not any of the others might consider co-reviewing or co-funding it);
- You've carefully read the applicable guidelines (and all other relevant guidelines, policies, terms and conditions, etc.) for the program you'd like to apply to, but something isn't quite clear, or there are ambiguous or conflicting/contradictory provisions in one or more of those documents that you need clarified; or

Your research development or research administration professional can help you with those questions - so ask them first!



- You need an allowable exception to one of the funder's deadlines, guidelines, or other requirements.

For either or both of the last two points, you can probably resolve the situation with a simple email or phone call (but see below for further discussion about which of those methods is preferable). For either or both of the first two points, your best option will be to prepare a concept outline, which we'll discuss further at the end of this paper.

When You SHOULD Contact a Program Officer		When You SHOULD NOT Contact a Program Officer	
Scenario	Purpose/Rationale	Scenario	Purpose/Rationale
Clarifying funder or program goals/priorities	Ensure your proposal aligns with the funder's mission & scope.	Your question has been answered in FAQs, guidelines, or other funder documents.	Makes it look like you're careless and unprepared - which won't reflect well on your science or scholarship. Always read the documentation first!
Resolving ambiguous guidelines	Clarify ambiguity about what is required or allowed, making sure you understand what the funder wants.	Status updates	This is a bit of a gray area. Funders' review processes follow processes and timelines they set, and usually interim updates are not provided. If it's been unusually long (for the funder or program in question), you may be OK asking for an update once - but not over and over again.
Seeking pre-submission feedback	Gauge the fit of your idea (if the funder or program allows this) before drafting or submitting a full proposal.	Disputing reviewers' critiques	Where there has been clear bias or a fairly obvious misunderstanding, ask the program officer about your options for appeal. Otherwise, the decision is final.

When You SHOULD Contact a Program Officer		When You SHOULD NOT Contact a Program Officer	
Scenario	Purpose/Rationale	Scenario	Purpose/Rationale
Seeking post-submission feedback on declined proposals	Get a sense for whether resubmission is a good idea, and more in-depth feedback on reviewer comments (when these are provided, not all funders do so).	Personal career advice	Unless you're asking about the possibility of working at or becoming a reviewer for the funder or one of its programs, have these conversations with your professional mentors.
Major project changes	At the development stage, check to see whether the change will impact eligibility or potential competitiveness (i.e., adding a new PI, changing collaborators). At award stage, significant changes to a project almost always require prior approval from the sponsor.	Just to chat  Just to introduce yourself to them  When you have a flash of inspiration that isn't yet developed into a project	In all of these situations, you shouldn't contact a program officer. In the last situation, contact your research development professional, a trusted colleague, or a professional mentor. Then, once the concept is fully developed, bring it to a program officer.
Unique submission circumstances	Address or request exceptions (e.g., disaster, illness of a key team member)	Asking for preferential treatment or exceptions	NIH allows members of its study sections to submit late. And most agencies allow exceptions for extreme disruptions beyond an investigator's control (severe weather, campus closures, illness or death, etc.). Otherwise, the rules, deadlines, and procedures apply to everybody without exception.



When You SHOULD Contact a Program Officer		When You SHOULD NOT Contact a Program Officer	
Scenario	Purpose/Rationale	Scenario	Purpose/Rationale
New investigator guidance	Early-career investigators (and anyone, regardless of career stage, approaching a new sponsor for the first time), seeking advice about program suitability, funder culture/expectations	Near the submission deadline or during a panel review.	If at all possible, wait until the deadline or the panel meeting has passed. If you must contact a program officer, make sure you've prepared thoroughly, and keep it as brief as possible.
Change in research plans/topics	Discuss whether your new plans, direction, or topics will fit with this program or agency, or whether you need to seek elsewhere	Asking for information about someone else's project or proposal.	If you need it, you should ask them to share what you need with you. Program officers will never do this. Ever.
Multiple project coordination	Determine whether level of potential overlap is permitted, or whether projects need to be completely independent	Repeating the same question hoping for a different answer	Ask your question once. If the answer you get is vague or ambiguous, it's OK to follow up for clarification. But don't keep asking for the same thing when you've already gotten an answer.
Post-award administrative issues	Resolve issues with grant management, reporting, etc. Check with your research administrator about whether questions of this kind should be addressed to the program officer or a grant manager at the funder.	Non-program information/inquiries	Contact the helpdesk, IT staff, etc., instead of a program officer.

## How to Contact Program Officers

Understand how the funder prefers that you get in touch with their staff. Sometimes there is a staff directory or "About Us" page that lists the program staff, together with their assigned areas of responsibility and their contact information. Other times, there may only be a single telephone number and/or email address for you to use. If you can reach out to an individual program officer, try to get a sense for how they would prefer to be contacted - and respect that preference as much as possible.

We've found that, as a general rule, email is always preferable when conducting business with program staff - provided, of course, that email is an allowable form of communicating with them. Always confirm the funder's or the program officer's preferred communication method; some agencies like NIH may prefer email, while others such as DOE might favor phone calls. Sending an email accomplishes a number of good things:

- It gives you a record of the conversation that took place, and also when it took place. Both program staff and RD professionals routinely juggle multiple tasks every day, and may not be able to recall relevant information from a discussion that happened days or weeks ago. Written records are more reliable than memory, especially for complex discussions.
- Asking your questions, or inviting the program officer to comment on a proposed project or research topic by email gives the program officer time to reflect, consider, and seek any additional advice or information they may need in order to give you the fullest and most complete answer to your questions. It's much harder to do that during a phone or a video call, where the program officer is both trying to take in what you're telling them and formulate an answer or come to a decision, all at the same time.
- Email also allows the program officer to answer it when it is most convenient for them to do so. For example, you will often get emails back from program staff outside of "typical" office hours because that's when they have time to write back. If you reach them by phone, they may be on their way to a meeting or another obligation - meaning they'll have to postpone the conversation, or give you a short answer that doesn't allow for discussion or follow-up until another, later date.

It's a great idea to save copies of emails to or from program officers, particularly if they include authorizations for deviations from the normal guidelines, procedures, etc. Keep a copy for yourself, someplace where you can easily lay hands on it again when necessary - but also make sure to share it with your research administration professionals, because they need to know what the program officer told you as well. They may also want to attach a copy of the email to the relevant records in your institution's proposal management system.

Program officers sometimes do not answer phone calls. This is no reflection on you. If you can't get through on the phone, follow up with an email and suggest some times when you'll be available.

Allow them grace. You most likely won't be the only person reaching out to them for help, and they're going to need time to research the question you're asking, or the project you're proposing. They may also need time to contact colleagues or other professionals within the funder's organization to give you the correct answer to your questions. In our experience, most program officers do their level best to respond to inquiries within a few days, but give them at least a week - longer, if your question is complex or if you're asking them to review a potential project for fit and suitability. If you haven't heard back from them after 7-10 days, it's OK to contact them again and ask for an update - but do so gently and respectfully. You don't know what's going on in their lives or what their work schedule is like.

As we said before, program officers will likely be circumspect when replying in writing, but they might be more willing to share information when they're "off the record." So you may want to follow up an email discussion with a phone call (or, if you're in the area, with an scheduled in-person appointment) if there are additional questions that come up or if you have a sense that there's something the program officer isn't saying. When following up by phone or videoconference (or in person), be sure to take notes on what was discussed - and share those notes with your research development and/or research administration professionals if they're relevant in any way to a proposal or a funded project.

Again, assuming it's not something the funder forbids or frowns upon, if you're going to be traveling to the city where a funder you're interested in applying to has its headquarters, you might also want to explore the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with one or more program officers. Since the pandemic, everybody seems to be relying more on video conferencing platforms, so you may not always be able to get an in-person meeting - but it doesn't hurt to try. Generally speaking, such meetings are most appropriate when you're approaching a new funder or a new program at a funder, and trying to get a sense for whether or not they'd be interested in your idea.

Your first step will then be to prepare a concept outline of your proposed project - which we'll talk about later. Once that's done, reach out to the program officer(s) you think might be interested in your project and let them know you're going to be coming to their area at some future date and would like to schedule a meeting. Include a copy of your outline and the timeline for your visit.

## Etiquette for Contacting a Program Officer

Firstly and most importantly, before trying to contact a program officer, you need to know whether or not the funder even allows that. If they don't, then you're going to have to rely on what's available in the funder's

published guidance, and on your network of colleagues (and those of your research development and/or research administration professionals) who have previous experience with the funder in question.

- As long as the funder allows you to contact program officers, there are additional factors for you to consider when choosing how and when to do so:
- During working hours, keep it professional and business-related. As we said earlier, the rules are different for social encounters at conferences and other professional meetings. (And you may find that program officers are more candid in such situations - there are limits to what they can say in an official email or a presentation that will be recorded or made available for public viewing.)
- Be as respectful as you can about the program officer's time, and be conscious of their schedule. For example, if you're within a few days before a major deadline (or, more importantly, a review panel or study section meeting), either keep your questions brief and provide as much background information as you can before asking them, or else find out from them when it might be more convenient to touch base once the deadline or the meeting has passed.
- Prepare before you reach out! Make sure you've read - carefully and thoroughly - their guidelines and other documents so you understand what they are and aren't willing to fund, and what the rules and procedures are that you're going to have to follow. If you are asking about what seems like an ambiguity or a contradiction in their guidelines, rules, procedures, etc., then give them chapter and verse on where you found the conflicting information (and you'll have that information handy from the notes you took while reading the materials). This goes double for any situation where you've heard different interpretations from multiple people at the funder, or where what you're hearing from one program officer is different from your previous experience or those of your colleagues or your RD professionals.
- Never reach out to a program officer (by whatever means) when you're stressed out, angry, or upset. Even if the program officers change pretty regularly (at the National Science Foundation, for example, most program staff are rotators - faculty or staff members from universities or other research institutions who come to NSF for a period of years, and then go back to their home institutions), the funder's systems have very long memories indeed. This rule is particularly applicable when you've just found out that a proposal you worked on for a long time was declined for funding. In that case, wait until the sting of not getting funded has passed before you contact the program officer for a debrief.

First, ask your RD and research administration professionals if they can answer your question, or help you research it. Then read, re-read, and re-re-read all of the materials associated with the opportunity and the funder. FAQs are becoming increasingly important as at least federal agencies try to keep up with multiple policy and procedural changes. Take notes as you read the materials for easy reference.

Conversations with program staff are not adversarial - they're not trying to punish you, or argue against you like a lawyer in front of a judge. They're trying to help you understand how best to present your ideas to their employer so that you maximize the chance that the funder will support your proposal for funding, and to understand what is, and what is not, in scope for that funder or funder's program. They will not advise you on how you should write your proposal to get it funded - but they will tell you whether or not the project is in scope and how you might best present your ideas for reviewers to understand what you're trying to accomplish.

However, there are inevitably going to be times when the answer you get from a program officer is “No.” When that happens, be as gracious as you possibly can when you thank the program officer for their time and consideration.

But if you’ve still got options, don’t let “No” be the final word in the conversation. If the program officer tells you that the idea you’re hoping they’ll support isn’t a good fit with the program they manage, the very next question you should ask them is if there’s another program at the same funder - or a different funder - that might be interested in supporting it. Program officers are aware of what other programs are doing that fund work similar to what their own program supports - and they frequently talk with the program officers at other programs, either because they need their expertise, or something has come to them that really belongs with the other program. So take advantage of their broader knowledge and expertise about who’s funding what in your area of interest. And it’s also a good idea to see if they can facilitate an introduction to the other program officer whose program might be a better fit, or whether they’d be willing to pass along your request, any supporting information, and your contact information to that program officer.

## Developing a Concept Outline

For this resource, we’re using the term “concept outline” and defining it much as NSF does in its [Proposal & Award Policies & Procedures Guide \(PAPPG\)](#). Funders may use different terms for documents like this, or require [different kinds of information](#) (and ways to submit them), but essentially a concept outline is a brief summary (typically two to three pages) of your research idea and the project you’re planning to develop into a proposal for the funder to consider.

Some funders (the Department of Energy, for example) allow - and may require - longer outlines, almost equivalent to a pre-proposal. Be sure you understand what your funder expects (and requires) before submitting a concept outline.

Your [goal in preparing](#) and submitting a concept outline is to capture the major, salient details about your idea and the project you’re planning, and to help the funder’s program staff understand it and determine whether or not it’s a good fit for them. It’s important to note that concept outlines are not the same thing as either a Letter of Intent/Interest (LOI) or a preliminary proposal. Concept outlines are short, don’t bind either the investigator or the funder, and primarily benefit the investigator. LOIs and preliminary proposals, on the other hand, presume that the investigator’s idea is a good fit for the program asking for the LOI/pre-proposal, and mainly benefit the funder (for example, helping determine how many proposals it will likely receive for a given competition, and what range of reviewer experience will be needed to consider them).

When developing a concept outline, be sure to involve your research development and/or research administration professionals. They can help you refine your ideas, understand the applicable guidelines and requirements, and also ensure that the rough budget you include in the outline actually matches the scope and complexity of the project and includes all relevant cost items or categories.

As we often tell investigators, if you’re going to find out at the end of the process that your idea isn’t what the funder is looking for, better to do that when you’ve only had to prepare a short outline and discuss it with

the program officer than after you've put in all the hard work to prepare and submit a full proposal. Program staff also have less work to do to evaluate a concept outline than what's required for reviewing and making a recommendation on a full proposal, so everyone's administrative burden is less.

The basic information included in a concept outline will typically include the following elements (though you should of course clearly follow any guidelines or requirements the specific funder you're approaching may have):

- An informative title that conveys the project's topic area and what you propose to do during the project
- Information about the research team who will design the project and carry out the work (PI, any named co-PIs or significant collaborators who supply expertise or other essential components of the project that you or your institution may lack). Give names and institutional affiliations at the very least.
- The type of proposal you anticipate submitting (research, early-concept, conference, fellowship, planning grant, etc.)
- Funders or funder's programs for which you think the idea is germane, and a brief description of how you think the idea fits within both the type of proposal you're considering and the research interests of the program or programs you're asking to consider the concept outline
- A few keywords to describe the project
- A rough estimate of how much funding you think will be required to complete the project
- A brief narrative description of the of the idea and how you plan to carry it out - goals or objectives, milestones and deliverables (if any), general approaches for how you'll undertake the proposed scope of work, how you plan to use the funds you'll be requesting, and lastly, how the proposed project satisfies the funder's strategic goals or helps meet its objectives, and also any review criteria that will be applied when evaluating an eventual proposal.

Unless the funder's guidelines specify otherwise, you should keep the narrative description of the project fairly broad: certainly not to the same level as in a full proposal. There are two exceptions to this rule:

1. You're planning to ask for something in your proposal that's either more expensive than, or unusual for, the program's norms; or
2. When the idea you're pitching is so new, or so far out ahead of current thinking or standard practice in the discipline.

Both of these situations involve added risks for the funder: a need to justify spending more money on a single project than they usually do, for example, or funding something that they normally wouldn't (exception #1) or finding reviewers qualified to evaluate the idea, and maybe also running the risk of being called on the carpet by more senior administrators - or Congress - for funding a project that the higher-ups don't understand or can't see the value of (exception #2). In either of those two cases, you'll want to provide more detail. The goal is for the program staff reading your concept outline to understand your need for the "unusual" request you're planning to include or to have a reasonable basis for assessing the likelihood that what you're proposing will be feasible and within the ability of you, your project team (if any), and your institution to carry out.

How you write your concept outline—like your full proposal—should reflect who will review it and how. If you're pitching to a foundation or non-governmental organization (especially smaller ones, or those without subject-matter experts on their review panels), imagine you're explaining your idea to a friend or relative without your background or training. Keep it clear and accessible: define key terms, use short, direct sentences, and avoid jargon. Most importantly, make sure your project is clearly linked to the outcomes, initiatives, or strategic goals that matter to the funder.

For a federal agency, or a large foundation or other funder that is staffed by subject-matter experts and uses a peer-review process for proposals that also includes subject-matter experts, you can be a little more technical in how you describe the project and your potential approach. Still, don't assume that everyone who reads your proposal knows exactly what you know, or understands your idea and the discipline in the same way you do. You'll still want to explain key concepts and terms, so as to not leave anything to chance.

In either case, your main job in the concept outline - as it will be in any proposal that comes from it - is to explain all of the following:

- Why it's important to do this work, or answer this question, or study this thing;
- Why the way you're proposing to do that work, etc., is the correct one to take;
- If you're proposing new approaches, tools, instrumentation, etc., that isn't currently well-established, explain why you think your way is better than the current best practice in the discipline - and also other ways you could do the work if your way turns out not to be practical or doesn't work;
- Why you (or your team, if you aren't working on your own) are the right person to do this work;



- That you, your team (if any), and all the participating institutions are capable of managing the eventual award, and can support and conduct the proposed work;
- Why you need as much funding as you're asking for, and why you've allocated it in the way you describe in the outline; and
- Why you think that the program you're pitching the outline to is the right one to review and fund the project.
- What you hope to change, or modify, based on the success of your proposal. Mainly, explain how you will make a difference in your particular community.

## Developing Letters of Intent/Interest (LOI)

Letters of Intent (LOIs) or Letters of Interest serve as preliminary submissions to funding agencies, signaling your intent to submit a full proposal. While not always required, they are commonly used in both federal and private funding processes to help funders gauge interest, scope, and eligibility before inviting a full proposal. Securing competitive funding often begins long before a full proposal is written—it starts with a strong Letter of Intent (LOI) or Letter of Interest. These documents serve as a first impression, helping funders assess whether a project aligns with their priorities. But crafting a compelling LOI isn't just the investigator's responsibility; it's a collaborative effort between the investigator and RD professionals. By working together early, teams can sharpen their proposal strategy, avoid common pitfalls, and increase their chances of advancing to the next stage.

RD professionals can help investigators analyze past awards, funding announcements, and reviewer comments to identify what the funder truly values. If an NIH program emphasizes translational impact, the LOI should highlight real-world applications. If a private foundation prioritizes community engagement, the LOI should detail partnerships and local involvement.

Elements of any LOI will include:

- An informative title that conveys the project's topic area and what you propose to do during the project
- A Clear Project Summary - here is where you capture the essence of your proposed work in a snapshot. This is your elevator pitch: the problem you are addressing, how you plan to tackle it, and what you expect to achieve.
- Demonstrated Fit with Funder Goals - this means going beyond merely aligning your project with the broad subject area of a funding opportunity. You need to explicitly illustrate how your research directly addresses the funder's specific priorities, objectives, and stated mission. For non-profit and foundation funders, you'll also need to describe the impact they can expect if they fund your project. Show them you've done your homework by referencing their strategic plans, recent initiatives, and even the language they use in their calls for proposals, and show them how funding your project will help them achieve one or more of their goals or priorities.

- Investigator and RD Expertise - a short, compelling overview of the research team assures funders the project is in capable hands. Investigators should highlight relevant grants, publications, or prior experience, while RD professionals can suggest strategic additions—like including an early-career researcher if the program values mentorship or a community partner if collaboration is a key criterion
- Scope and Budget - briefly outline the main activities and overall boundaries of your proposed project. Avoid extensive detail, but provide enough information for the funder to understand the general scale and what your project will achieve.

Federal LOIs tend to be more formal and structured, often following specific agency templates. NIH, for example, may request a one-page summary with clear research objectives, while NSF might emphasize broader impacts. RD professionals can help investigators navigate these nuances, ensuring the right keywords and framing are used. Foundation LOIs, on the other hand, are often more narrative-driven. They should speak directly to the foundation's values—whether that's innovation, equity, or scalability.

Whether applying to a federal agency or a private foundation, the key is to be clear, and align your intent or interest with the funder's goals and expectations. Rely on your RD professionals to help you turn your LOI into a powerful stepping stone toward success.

## Developing Pre-Proposals

A pre-proposal, basically, is a short description of your project. Funders use them in different ways. Sometimes, pre-proposals are screening tools whether your project aligns with the. Other times, pre-proposals undergo the full scrutiny of a full proposal, but usually on a shorter timeline. If your pre-proposal misses the mark, chances are you may not get invited to submit a full proposal. It's a good idea to involve RD professionals early in the pre-proposal process to help you tell your story. RD professionals play a key role because, again, they have institutional expertise and most likely know funder expectations.

Early RD involvement helps avoid wasted effort, in the same way that consulting literature prevents duplicative efforts. RD professionals can identify when a project might better fit a different funding mechanism, when the project team needs adjusting to meet criteria, and when scope and budgets should be recalculated based on prior knowledge of a particular funder.

Much like the concept outline and the LOI, there are common elements to include in your pre-proposal; however, the driver of what to include will come from the funder.

Elements of most pre-proposals will include:

- Brief Overview – Clearly states the project's purpose, goals, and expected outcomes.
- Alignment with Funder – Explains how the project supports the agency's or foundation's priorities.
- Scope and Feasibility – Provides a high-level description of methods, timeline, and key personnel.
- Budget Estimate – May include a rough funding range (if required).

An important fact to remember: pre-proposals are not binding! This means that, should something change along the way after you've submitted your pre-proposal, you are not bound to the next step.

There are benefits to completing a pre-proposal. You may find that, after an early draft, this opportunity does not quite fit your planned research. Or, you submitted the proposal and based on early feedback from the funder, you now know what to do to improve your proposal. In any case, developing a pre-proposal will be a beneficial step, so long as you work with your RD professionals and explicitly follow the funder's requirements.

Feature	Concept Outline	Letter of Intent/ Interest (LOI)	Preliminary Proposal
Length	Short	Varies (can be more detailed than a concept outline)	Concise version of a full research proposal
Binding	Non-binding for both investigator and funder	Can be binding or non-binding, depending on funder rules	Typically is binding, but can be non-binding, depending on funder rules
Primary Beneficiary	Investigator (helps clarify research fit)	Funder (e.g., helps gauge proposal volume, reviewer needs)	Funder (gauges interest, and may use it as a screening step before a full proposal is invited)
Presumption	No presumption of fit; used to explore alignment	Presumes the idea is a good fit for the program	Presumes the idea is a good fit for the program

## RESOURCES

- A. Bauer, David G. The “How To” Grants Manual: Successful Grantseeking Techniques for Obtaining Public and Private Grants, Ninth edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). Provides examples of LOIs and pre-proposals. Particularly good when it comes to working with private funders.
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