

## Communicating With Program Officers

### Why should I contact a program officer?

Program officers (POs) exist within all foundations, and federal/state agencies with granting authority. They typically have several duties, including providing administrative and technical assistance to applicants in preparing and submitting grants.

Although applicants are often reluctant to contact POs, working with a PO is an important part of the application process, which can improve the chances of funding. POs often serve as the liaison between an applicant and the application review committee. Additionally, a PO's immediate response can be a good predictor of an applicant's chance of success.

Contacting a PO before submission of a grant applications can:

- Confirm if a project idea fits with the sponsor's/program's objectives
- Provide insight into the potential enthusiasm for your project
- Provide suggestions about more appropriate programs, institutes, or mechanism if appropriate and necessary
- Expose underlying considerations, methodology trends, preferences, dislikes, and shifting priorities that do not appear in published material.
- Provide guidance about your project design, collaboration, budget, and timeline

With the exception of some foundations that clearly discourage pre submission contact, most Pos encourage applicants to contact them early and often. However, POs are busy. So, when you are ready for contact, you will need to be thoughtful, clear, and focused, and patient.

### How do I go about finding a program officer?

You can identify the point of contact or PO for the funding opportunity or best suited to your project by searching through the request for proposals (RFP), funding opportunity web page, or on an agency, program, or institute contact list (NIH also has a tool called Matchmaker that can help – see article in this newsletter).

### What's the best procedure for communicating with a PO?

You should ALWAYS email the PO first asking for a follow up telephone call. Carefully choose the subject line, giving the PO some context to your message before reading it.

Begin your email with a few sentences describing your central question and the hypothesis you are proposing to test, so that the PO has easy access to the context of your work. *Note in this brief introduction that you have attached a project overview to the email.*

*Project Overview (Elevator Pitch/Concept Paper):* The goal of this précis is to leave a good first impression and encourage further discussion. Your overview should:

- Be written in jargon-free language, and no longer than one page in a readable font (12 point Times New Roman).

- Introduce the topic of the project in a way that is clearly related to the sponsor/program objectives and mission.
- State the problem or opportunity the project addresses and its significance.
- Explain how you plan to solve the problem or realize the opportunity.
- Explain the expected outcomes of the project, again thinking of how the outcomes relate to the sponsor's/program's mission.
- Highlight the ways your project is unique/innovative.

Then, move to your relevant question(s), phrased as clearly and briefly as possible. Your most important question will be about the sponsor's potential interest in your project. Relevant questions include (be CERTAIN these questions are not already answered in published materials):

- Does the proposed project match the sponsor's/program's current priorities? If it does not, ask for suggestions to alter the project or about other programs that might make a better fit.
- What can be done to improve the chances of a favorable review? The PO knows this is why you are contacting them, so not need to be shy.
- What are the most common reasons proposals are rejected? This exposes some of the underlying/lesser understood considerations of a review panel.
- Are there any emerging interests within the program? Again, this exposes underlying review considerations.
- Is the award amount expected to change compared to the previous year?
- What is the anticipated success rate for the coming grant cycle?

Finally, thank the PO and ask if you can contact them via phone to discuss the viability of your project and the questions you included in your email. List your available dates and times as a courtesy and ask for specific dates and times that work for them and the number you should call.

Give the PO a week to respond, then e-mail a gentle reminder. A delayed response does not mean they are disinterested—remember, they're busy. And, some POs are more difficult to engage than others. It's possible you will encounter an unresponsive PO, but don't fret, there are typically numerous contact names for an opportunity. Simply move on to another name. If you are referred back to the unresponsive contact, you can reply: "Thank you. I have been unsuccessful in getting in touch with \_\_\_\_\_. Can you help me get in touch or advise me on how best to reach \_\_\_\_\_?"

### **How about the Phone Call?**

The desired result of an email is a phone call with the PO. When that happens, there are a few things you should do to ensure you get the information you need and want:

- Have your questions written down.
- Send any documents/white papers at least 24 hours before the call with a confirmation email.
- Be ready to state the goal of your project and give your elevator pitch.

### **Need some Tips?**

**DO:**

- Read the agency and funding program web pages, the RFP (more than once), any FAQs or supporting documentation.
- Show passion for your project.
- Communicate directly and briefly.
- Have your questions prepared.
- Be ready to LISTEN to the PO (especially for any information that does not appear in the RFP and that addresses funding objectives or priorities).

**DO NOT:**

- Wait until a week or two before your proposal is due to contact a PO!
- Cold call—you should email first requesting a follow up phone call.
- Ask questions you could have easily answered yourself by looking online or at materials provided by the sponsor.
- Speak disparagingly of your colleagues or competitors.
- Try to force-fit your interests to the grant program objectives.
- Try to tell the PO what you think they should be funding.
- Focus on yourself or your past/future greatness.
- Overwhelm the PO with papers and materials.
- Deliver a lengthy monologue about your project.

**Online Resources:**

[One Program Officer's Candid Tips for Grantseekers](#)