Developing a Concept Paper & Contacting a Program Officer

Prepared For Temple University

CONCEPT PAPERS: PURPOSE

Concept Paper: Purpose

A concept paper provides a concise summary of the key elements of a funding request for the purpose of soliciting feedback and/or buy-in from prospective funders, prospective partners, and other potential stakeholders. It should be...

- Written in the first person
- Explicitly related to the goals of the funder
- Written in a style appropriate to the funder
- Generally reflective of the structure of a full proposal
- One to five pages in length

Source: NSF (2015)

CONCEPT PAPERS: TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Technical Specifications

A concept paper should follow any technical specifications provided by the funder. If no specifications are provided, we recommend the following:

- Match the formatting of the funder's full proposal specifications*OR*

- 1" margins
- single-spaced
- 11 pt Arial
- 0.25" left indented, fully justified paragraphs
- Bold headings where appropriate

CONCEPT PAPERS: KEY COMPONENTS

Key Components

A concept paper should follow the outline of the funder's requirements or their usual proposal structure. If none is provided, we recommend the following key components:

- Introduction
- Purpose/Need
- Project Description
- Goals/Objectives/Aims/Research Questions
- Methods
- Timeline
- Expected Outcomes/Benefits (and often Evaluation)
- Budget/Needs & Requested Support
- Contact Information

Introduction

Introduce your idea and identify the program or opportunity you think is a good fit. Demonstrate that you understand the mission of the funding agency and the types of projects that they support. Identify how your project meets the goals of the funder. Identify any other funders that will be involved and their interest in the project where appropriate. Introduce the question, problem, or need to be addressed.

Example:

In response to RFA-1234, *Studies to Enhance the Texture of Peanut Butter*, we propose a cross-over randomized controlled trial to compare consumer preference for fluffy vs. powdered peanut butter among school age children in urban communities. This project will address the USDA's goal of understanding consumer preferences in this difficult to please group and may provide critical insights into understanding how and why these preferences often fail to persist into adulthood. Although the RFA allows for industry support, we are electing to forgo Skippy's funding to reduce the risk of unintended bias.

Sources: Echegoyen (2013); Kuhn, (July 20, 2015); NSF (2015)

Purpose/Need

Briefly provide supporting documentation for the importance of addressing this question, problem, or need. If you have statistical data, use it. Cite significant and compelling sources. Why does this project matter? Make sure you cite or refer to what others have accomplished relative to your project.

More than 18 million children eat peanut butter every day, with peak annual consumption at age 11.7 years. Peanut butter consumption gradually declines through the remaining public school years and remains at about 0.6 jars per person per year throughout adulthood. The USDA and the peanut industry have identified low peanut butter consumption as a major risk for multiple chronic conditions in adulthood such as full-time employment, mortgage payments (sometimes extending as long as 30 years), and the birth of children. Pan et al. (2012) hypothesized that age-related changes in texture perception and texture-mediated pleasure responses are responsible for the widespread reduction...

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Project Description

Concisely describe what you plan to do, your approach, who benefits and potential impacts.

We propose to compare consumer responses to fluffy vs. powdered peanut butter in 420 school age children recruited from 6 urban schools in Los Angeles... [Additional but brief detail]

Sources: NSF (2015)

Goals/Objectives/Aims/Research Questions

Outline your goals, objectives/aims, and research questions. Goals are simply a clearer statement of the vision, specifying the accomplishments to be achieved if the vision is to become real. The target objectives/aims are clearer statements of the specific activities required to achieve the goals. A goal is a statement describing a broad or abstract intent, state or condition. An objective is a statement of action or intent to achieve measurable outcomes that relate to the goal.

Our **short-term goals** are to improve our understanding of peanut butter texture preferences in school age children and to evaluate Pan et al.'s hypothesis on age-related changes in texture preferences accounting for changes in peanut butter consumption. Our **long-term goal** is to develop peanut butter products with textures that appeal to adults and thereby increase adult peanut butter consumption and reduce chronic conditions associated with low consumption. To achieve these goals, we propose the following objectives/aims:

Objective 1. Conduct a randomized controlled trial comparing texture preferences for fluffy vs. powdered peanut butter in 420 school age...

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Sources: NSF (2015)

Methods & Timeline

Briefly describe how the project be carried out, providing sufficient detail to allow the reader to assess feasibility and likely impact but not so much detail that the reader is overwhelmed. Make sure the methods and timeline are explicitly related to the goals and objectives.

In partnership with the Los Angeles County School District, we identified 6 schools serving a diverse population of children in grades K-12 that will be available for recruitment. In Year 1, we will recruit 420 children across all grades, and they will be randomly assigned to receive fluffy or powdered peanut butter in sandwich form once per week during school lunch for 3 months. After a one-month break, groups will be switched to receive the other form of peanut butter in sandwich form once per week during school lunch for 3 months. Throughout the administration, research staff will assess sandwich waste. At baseline and 3, 4, 7, and 8 months, we will administer multiple measures to assess...

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Sources: NSF (2015)

Budget/Needs & Requested Support

If appropriate, indicate the overall budget for the project, identify other contributors and the amounts pledged, and state your request of the funder. This is usually only included with foundation-type funders, and then usually only with formal Letters of Inquiry (LOIs).

(not appropriate for a USDA concept paper)

Since we are electing not to accept Skippy's support to reduce the risk of bias in this study, we are requesting $250,000 direct costs per year for three years for this study.

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Sources: NSF (2015)

EXERCISE: DRAFTING A CONCEPT PAPER

Drafting an Example Concept Paper

Funder?
Funder Goals?
Research
Question/Need?

- Introduction
- Purpose/Need
- Project Description
- Goals/Objectives/Aims/Research Questions
- Methods
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CONTACTING A PROGRAM OFFICER

How to Find a Program Officer

NSF and most Agencies – Program Opportunity listings

NIH – RFAs and Project RePORTER
(https://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm)

Foundations – search their websites or other listings

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Example Email

Subject: Request for call to discuss XXX due on DATE

Dear Dr. X:

I am interested in submitting a proposal for RFA #XXX "RFA Title" and would like to schedule a call with you to discuss whether my research is appropriate for this opportunity. [If your request is urgent, indicate that here and explain why.]

[Briefly describe your proposed work and why you think it is a good fit.] If it would be helpful, I can provide a [brief concept paper / specific aims] for you to review prior to our call. [If you have specific questions that you want the PO to consider, include them here.]

[Provide possible days/times *or* indicate that you can be available at the PO's convenience.]

Thank you in advance for your assistance. I look forward to talking with you soon.

Contact Info

Sources: Echegoyen (2013); Harris (March 23, 2015; July 13, 2015); Kuhn, (July 20, 2015); NSF (2015)

Preparing for the Call

Common Questions:

- Is this project a good fit / competitive for this opportunity / your funding priorities?

- Are there other opportunities that would be a better fit?

- What are your recommendations for improving the fit / competitiveness?

- What other recommendations do you have?

- What are the most common causes for proposals being declined for this opportunity?

- What are the usual success rates for this program?

- What is your preferred method for me to contact you if I have additional questions?

After the Call

Follow up with an email thanking the PO for their time and summarizing the key points you took away from the call.

In any future communication about this opportunity, reference your call. Change the subject line of your email to reflect the purpose and urgency of the request.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional Resources

How to get a speedy response from a Program Officer:

https://www.niaid.nih.gov/research/grants-how-speedy-response-program-officer

R. Porter. (2009) Can we talk? Contacting Grant Program Officers (and other resources available at https://www.okhighered.org/grant-opps/docs/can-we-talk-contacting-program-officers.pdf

Examples and additional resources are available for developing concept papers on many university websites. Be careful to distinguish between examples for grant proposals and business ideas.

http://www.biosciencewriters.com/How-to-get-the-most-Help-from-your-NIH-Program-Officer.aspx

https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/ahss/Grant_Resources_Images/Communicating_with_Funders_and_POs.pdf

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