

The Concept Paper or Letter of Intent

After envisioning a project and learning of some possible funding sources, the principal investigator may prepare a rough outline or a concept paper. These are brief two-to-four-page documents that present a condensed version of your proposal. The outline or concept paper should include an opening paragraph, the need you are addressing, the key ideas or hypotheses, a description of the project design, a brief timeline, the expected outcomes, your qualifications, and the overall budget you are requesting. If interested, the funder will ask for a full proposal from the applicant. This two-stage process is common for **foundation** proposals. In general, proposals should address the following:

- Is the idea new and innovative?
- Is the idea timely?
- Is there a clear need for the project?
- What difference will the project make?
- What has already been done/accomplished in this area?
- How will the project accomplish its goals and objectives?
- How will the project's effectiveness be evaluated?
- Is the project cost effective?

Of course, these questions should be adapted to your specific project, and the proposal should be viewed in the context of the funding agency's priorities. The actual format for the proposal will vary according to the sponsor. Federal/state agencies and foundations typically provide very detailed instructions for proposal preparation, including the method of delivery. For example, almost all federal agencies require that proposals be submitted electronically. It is important that you **follow all directions carefully**, as funders usually reject proposals simply on the basis of errors in page limits, type size, etc. The Office of Sponsored Programs will assist you with formatting and editing.

While almost all proposals will be reviewed by a panel of experts in the field, often panel members have a wide spectrum of backgrounds and areas of expertise. It is up to you to make your proposal as clear, precise, and persuasive as possible.

Consultation with the Dean, Colleagues, and the Office of Sponsored Programs

The principal investigator may wish to solicit comments and suggestions from fellow faculty, their unit chair, and their dean. The PI and director of Sponsored Programs discuss the idea, identify potential sponsors, review University procedures, sponsor regulations, and along with the grants accountant, develop the budget.

All of the published literature on grantsmanship emphasizes the importance of making contact with funding sources. The principal investigator (and/or the director of Sponsored Programs) may correspond with the program officer(s) of the prospective sponsor(s). The PI uses this opportunity to describe his/her interests and get the program officer's feedback. Some agency personnel are more involved than others; sometimes the program officer will review a draft of the proposal.

The Office of Sponsored Programs will insure that both the University and the PI/PD are eligible to apply for funding.

The Working Draft and Budget

The PI/PD is now ready to write a good working draft of the proposal that will include a detailed timeline and budget. The timeline is part of the project design or project plan that describes the activities of the grant personnel over the course of the grant period. Many foundations fund projects for a one-year period, while federal agencies vary, with the U.S. Department of Education typically funding proposals for three-year periods and the National Institutes of Health for between four and five years.

For the draft budget, the principal investigator and the grants accountant review the basic budget categories. Typically, these are:

1. Salaries and fringe benefits of the project personnel, the principal investigator(s), research assistants,