NC A&T ADVANCE Institutional Transformation (IT) Project

"An Aggie's Guide for Contacting and Visiting a Program Officer/Director"

Goal:

The goal of visiting a Program Officer/Director at a specific funding agency is to learn about possible funding opportunities that may be coming down the pipeline. It is also an opportunity for the agency to become familiar with your expertise. In addition to receiving insight on how to draft a fundable proposal, a visit to a funding agency might result in an invitation to serve on a proposal review panel, committee or task force.

Why Contact a Program Officer/Director?

Before the proposal is funded:

- To confirm if the proposed research is a good fit with the program's goals and objectives.
- To determine relevant programs in another part of the agency that the proposed research might fit.
- To inquire about new priorities in the agency that do not yet have published funding opportunities.
- To seek advice on preparing a proposal.
- To ascertain if the project design is using the right approach.
- To determine the most important components of the proposal.
- To ask about the types of institutional support that the agency would you like to see in a fundable proposal.
- To find out the types of projects that are currently "hot" and most likely to be funded.
- To obtain recommendations of other funding tracks for the proposed research.
- To ask about compliance issues.
- To request assignments to a specific review panel or agency program.

After the proposal is funded:

- To answer any questions about the review or summary.
- To obtain clarity on the agency codes on the review of your proposal
- If the reviewers seem to disagree, to find out which was the stronger feeling in the room.
- To gain insight into the discussion of your application at the peer review meeting.
- To obtain guidance on how much to revise before resubmitting, if you did not receive a fundable score.
- To remain in touch and check on the status of your proposal if the funding decision on your application is deferred until later in the fiscal year.

Guidance Provided by a Program Officer/Director:

- Assess the fit of your scientific concept or proposal with a specific RFP (Request for Proposal), RFA (Request For Application) or PA (Program Announcement) as well as with the sponsor's priorities.
- Discuss new topics that the agency is interested in funding before a dedicated RFA or PA has been created.
- Offer guidance regarding which directorate (NSF) or institute (NIH) as well as study section your particular research is most likely to be well received and have the most interest.
- Offer advice regarding the appropriate funding mechanism/grant type, budget, and project duration for the proposed research.
- Give feedback on the design of your project.
- Answer questions about guidelines or procedures.
- Offer insight into the review process, e.g., verify what methodologies reviewers prefer.

How to Find a Program Officer/Manager/Director:

If you do not already know your program officer, here are some ways to identify the appropriate program Officer/director for your proposal.

1. If you are applying to a specific RFA or PA, contact the program officer that is listed.
2. Search the specific institute's website to find the program officer in your area.
3. Search RePORTER (*projectreporter.nih.gov*) for funding research opportunities and contact the program officer for that grant.

Do not be too stressed if you are unsure exactly who would be the correct program officer/director to contact. Generally, if you do not contact the correct person, you will be directed to the correct program officer/director.

Pre-Visit Preparations:

1. Discuss your proposed research with your department chair, potential collaborators and the staff in The Office of Research Services and Project Management (Division of Research and Economic Development-DORED).
2. Conduct background research to understand the funding agency's role, mission as well as funding priorities.
   - *Browse the agency's website for RFAs, PAs, "Dear Colleagues Letters", and special reports of symposia, workshops and/or task forces.*
   - *Search the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council, and White House Office of Science & Technology Policy websites for reports that shed light on shifts in research priorities or details on upcoming initiatives.*
3. Review recent awards to become knowledgeable on how your research might contribute to a base of knowledge or fill a gap. Remain in your area of expertise but be willing to adjust the proposed project to fit with the grant opportunity. Pay attention to the range and types of past funding awards to determine if your project's budgetary and time estimates align with past awards.
4. Prepare a **summary of research interests and strengths.**
   - *Half-page to one-page descriptive CV or biographical sketch in the format appropriate to the funding agency.*
   - *List of key peer-reviewed publications (maximum one page) – make sure they are relevant to the program you are targeting.*

   * *List of key federally funded projects.*
   * *Description of your strengths as a PI.*
   * *Provide a list of potential collaborators.*
5. Compose (at least one month in advance of your visit) a two-page **white/concept paper** on your proposed research that includes:
   * *Title*
   * *Overall Goal*
   * *Outline of the problem to be addressed*
   * *Gaps in current research*
   * *Questions the proposed research will address*
   * *Potential impacts/outcomes*
   * *Statement of the significance of the proposed research including the uniqueness of the project in light of existing research and its potential contribution to the field of knowledge or solution to an existing problem.*
6. Prepare a list of questions for each PO/PD meeting. Decide in advance what you would like to achieve in a face-to-face meeting and what feedback you hope to receive.
7. Practice speaking concisely about your research in an "elevator speech".
   * *Use Heilmeier's Catechism (a set of questions that one should be able to answer when proposing a research project or product development effort) to frame your "elevator speech":*
      1. *What are you trying to do? Articulate your objectives using absolutely no jargon.*
      2. *How is it done today, and what are the limits of current practice?*
      3. *What is new in your approach, and why do you think it will be successful?*
      4. *Who cares?*
      5. *If you are successful, what difference will it make?*
      6. *What are the risks and the payoffs?*
      7. *How much will it cost?*
      8. *How long will it take?*
      9. *What are the midterm and final "exams" to check for success?*
   * *Introduce your research topic in a way that shows relevance to the agencies' or program's objectives and mission as well as why it is important.*
   * *State the problem or opportunity that the proposed research addresses and your plan solving the problem or realize the opportunity*
8. Familiarize yourself with the entry and exit protocols for the funding agency you plan to visit.

Setting up a Visit:

Once a program officer/director has been identified, arrange a visit by sending an email containing the following information:

- Express that you would like to discuss your ideas with the PO/PD ahead of submission in a face-to-face meeting. However be open to an alternative form of meeting either virtually (Skype or FaceTime) or via a phone call.
- Provide the summary of your research interests and strengths document and your white/concept paper.
- Provide date(s) for a face-to-face meeting; generally say you have "blocked" the whole day, or morning or afternoon to meet with them. Prioritize your meetings so that you confirm the most important meetings first.
- Request a response on a specified date (which should be within 3-5 days), after which you will call to follow up.

- After the initial email exchange, you may be asked to engage in a phone conversation with the PO/PD. If so, be ready to deliver your elevator speech. Use the call to discuss a face-to-face meeting and to ascertain the critical success factors and unofficial rules related to the grant program to aid you in deciding if the funding is targeted to your research to know how to shape your proposal for a favorable review. Follow up the call with a thank you email!
- In an email, confirm your face-to-face visit at the agency to meet with the PO/PD. **NOTE:** Avoid scheduling your visit on Fridays or Mondays on long holiday weekends and avoid 2-3 weeks prior to and after PO/PDs deadlines (they are busy preparing for panels, processing incoming proposals or assigning reviews). Also, do not attempt to schedule a meeting in late summer (late July – August) as PO/PDs are busy processing award actions before the end of the fiscal year.

Meeting with the Program Officer:

- Know the agency's location and be familiar with the check-in procedure so that you will arrive to your meeting on time. **NOTE:** Remember to bring a picture ID!
- Be prepared to provide a brief, concise description – no more than 15 minutes long – of your research interests and strengths. The program officer will already have your research interests and PI strengths document and white paper in hand, so you do not need to reiterate all the information included in those documents. **NOTE:** Bring hard copies of the material previously provided.
- Give the program officer ample time and opportunity to comment on your research and to explain their programs. Listen closely for his/her advice and recommendations. Remember that this is the reason for the visit – to get their ideas. ***Listen carefully and take detailed notes.***
- Ask the program officers a few of your prepared questions/talking points but remember to allow the program officer/director sufficient time to respond.
- Plan to keep the meeting within the planned timeframe. Do not rush the meeting but take your cue from the program officer/director.
- End the meeting with thanks and make sure you exchange business cards with the program officer.

Talking points you might include:

1. Notable research publications from your lab (science citation index-impact factor).
2. Research accolades; make note of other unique features that distinguish your work or your research team, without seeming arrogant or bragging.
3. Since NC A&T demographics are favorable, offer a "picture" of the students in your lab by highlighting successful students from underrepresented groups, or institutional efforts at broadening participation. **NOTE:** Many RFPs are specifically asking for "Broadening Participation Plans" as part of proposal submission requirements.

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Sample questions to ask or not ask during the meeting:

Do ask:

1. Does my project fall within your current priorities?
2. What would you recommend to improve my chances?
3. What are some of the common reasons for proposal rejections?
4. For NSF grants, ask about ideas for broader impacts; for NIH, ask which study section is best to target.
5. What is the expertise of reviewers who will be on the panel?
6. Do you feel this concept paper is appropriate for the funding opportunity?
7. Do you have alternate recommendations for data sources?
8. How much preliminary data is needed?
9. Do you have recommendations for refining my aims / objectives?
10. Do you have a recommendation about an appropriate review panel or agency program for my application?
11. What areas is the directorate or institute interested in funding?
12. Should I contact you again before submitting my application?
13. Do you have any other recommendations?
14. What were the funding rates from the last few calls?
15. How are proposals typically reviewed (ad hoc, panel or both)?
16. Who reviews (for example a mix of scientifically literate laypersons and subject matter experts, junior/senior faculty, etc.)?
17. What can I do to become a reviewer?

Do not ask:

1. Is it possible for you to review my proposal before it is submitted?
2. Do you like my idea or proposal?
3. Can you provide examples or copies of funded proposals?
4. Did Professor X receive funding?
5. Who would you recommend to serve as co-principal investigators for my project?
6. Can you serve on my advisory board?
7. Is it possible for you to visit my campus?
8. Can Congressman X help me or provide a letter of support?
9. Who is on the review panel?

Post-Visit Follow-Up:

1. Review and summarize your notes as soon as possible following the meeting.
2. If required, prepare a summary report of the visit and submit a copy to university administrators and any collaborators. The summary report should include the following:
   * *The names of the agency or agencies you visited and the programs you contacted, along with the names of the program officers with whom you interacted.*
   * *A brief overview of what you learned.*
   * *A summary of outcomes and task-actions for follow up: funding opportunities, review panel or committee service, etc.*
3. Send a thank you note to each program officer/contact person with whom you interacted with a brief summary of your conversation. Keep the lines of communication open with the interested program officers as appropriate.
4. Respond positively to any offers from program officers to serve on review panels, committees, or task forces. These are important outcomes of your visit!

References:

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3. Communicating with Funders and Program Officers. College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, North Dakota State University (Published 5/15/15) https://www.ndsu.edu/ahss/faculty_and_staff/grantresources/communicatingwithfunders/
4. Matthew Capdevielle, Ralf Bendlin, and Gretchen Busl, "The Elevator Pitch: Presenting Your Research in Conversation," the Graduate School, University of Notre Dame.
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6. Robert Porter, "Can We Talk? Contacting Grant Program Officers", Research Management Review 17(1): Fall/Winter 2009.
7. Richard Nader, Advise for Meeting Directors at NSF. https://research.ku.edu/sites/research.ku.edu/files/docs/nader_advice_for_meeting_directors_at_NSF.pdf