



# HANOVER WEBINAR: CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRAM OFFICER OUTREACH

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March 23, 2022

Prepared for Penn State University

# TODAY'S LOGISTICS

**PRESENTATION LENGTH** ~90 min

**Q&A and WRAP-UP** We will invite questions and discussion throughout the presentation.

**RECORDING & SLIDES** All attendees can access the slides and corresponding recording following today's presentation.

# TODAY'S PRESENTER



Erin  
Vasudevan

GRANTS CONSULTANT

- Ph.D. in Neuroscience
- Leader of externally-funded research program for 10 years
- Award-winning physiology educator and pedagogy researcher
- Joined Hanover in July 2021
  - 60+ grant consults, reviews, revisions, and writing projects completed to date

## SPECIALIZES IN



## On a Personal Note...



TRAVELLER: Has visited all continents except Antarctica



CHILDHOOD DREAM: Be a musician



SCUBA DIVER: Loves sharks and cephalopods

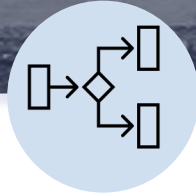




# OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S TOPICS



Good vs. Fundable  
Concepts



Using Logic Models +  
Budgets for Project Design



Concept Papers



Program Officer  
Outreach

## Today's Learning Objectives:

1. Identify characteristics of fundable projects
2. Use logic models + budgets as tools for concept design
3. Construct an outline of a typical concept paper
4. Develop an action plan for Program Officer outreach



# A QUICK POLL

Q1: Do you have prior experience developing a concept paper?

Q2: If yes, what have you used this for in the past? Select all that apply:

- A. Program Officer / Funder outreach
- B. Engaging potential collaborators or stakeholders
- C. Inviting colleague feedback
- D. Clarifying my own thinking and planning for the project

*Share any positive / negative experiences in the chat!*





# **BUILD A STRONG CONCEPT**

A Strong Concept is your Foundation

# GOOD VS. FUNDABLE IDEAS

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## A GOOD IDEA

Helps someone

Advances an important agenda

Serves a wise/substantial purpose

Creates interest



## A FUNDABLE IDEA

Addresses funder's target audience

Advances funder's agenda

Has "significance"

Aligns with institutional priorities



# GOOD VS. FUNDABLE IDEAS

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## A GOOD IDEA

- Helps someone
- Advances an important agenda
- Serves a wise/substantial purpose
- Creates interest
- Involves growth or learning
- Can have undefined steps or processes
- Builds something of value
- Can be of any scale
- Can be a one-time effort



## A FUNDABLE IDEA

- Addresses funder's target audience
- Advances funder's agenda
- Has "significance"
- Aligns with institutional priorities
- Measures/Analyzes/Evaluates objectives and impacts
- Solid, well-articulated methodology and approach
- Is innovative/adds to body of knowledge/advances the field
- Is scaled by prior experience, budget, & funded activities
- Should be replicable

# IS MY IDEA BAD, GOOD, OR FUNDABLE?

- ✓ Positive preliminary data
- ✓ Novelty
- ✓ Low cost
- ✓ Institutional/external financial support
- ✓ Existing partnerships
- ✓ Sustainability
- ✓ Meaningful outcomes
- ✓ Equitable process + outcomes

Project outcomes are grantmakers' ROI.



# SET THE STAGE: KNOW YOUR FIELD

How does  
your work  
relate to  
other work in  
the field?

- What **gap in knowledge** or services will this work fill?
- Does this work **build on previous or current work**?
- Does this work **solve a fundamental challenge** facing the field?
- Does this work **duplicate other work**?
- How will this work **contribute to the field** in the short and long term?
- Is this work **a priority** for the field?

# “FUNDER-INFORMED” PROJECT DESIGN?

*Don't “chase  
funding”...*

*Do design your  
project with  
funders' goals in  
mind*

- *Why is this project needed?*
- *What, when, where are you proposing?*
- *Who will be impacted in the short and long-term?*
- *How will you know what the impacts are?*





# Using Logic Models + Budgets for Project Design

# HOW WILL A LOGIC MODEL HELP?

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- Forces you to **concisely describe approach**
- **Summarizes linkages** more simply than prose
- Emphasizes **research basis** for project
- Narrows focus on **meaningful outcomes**

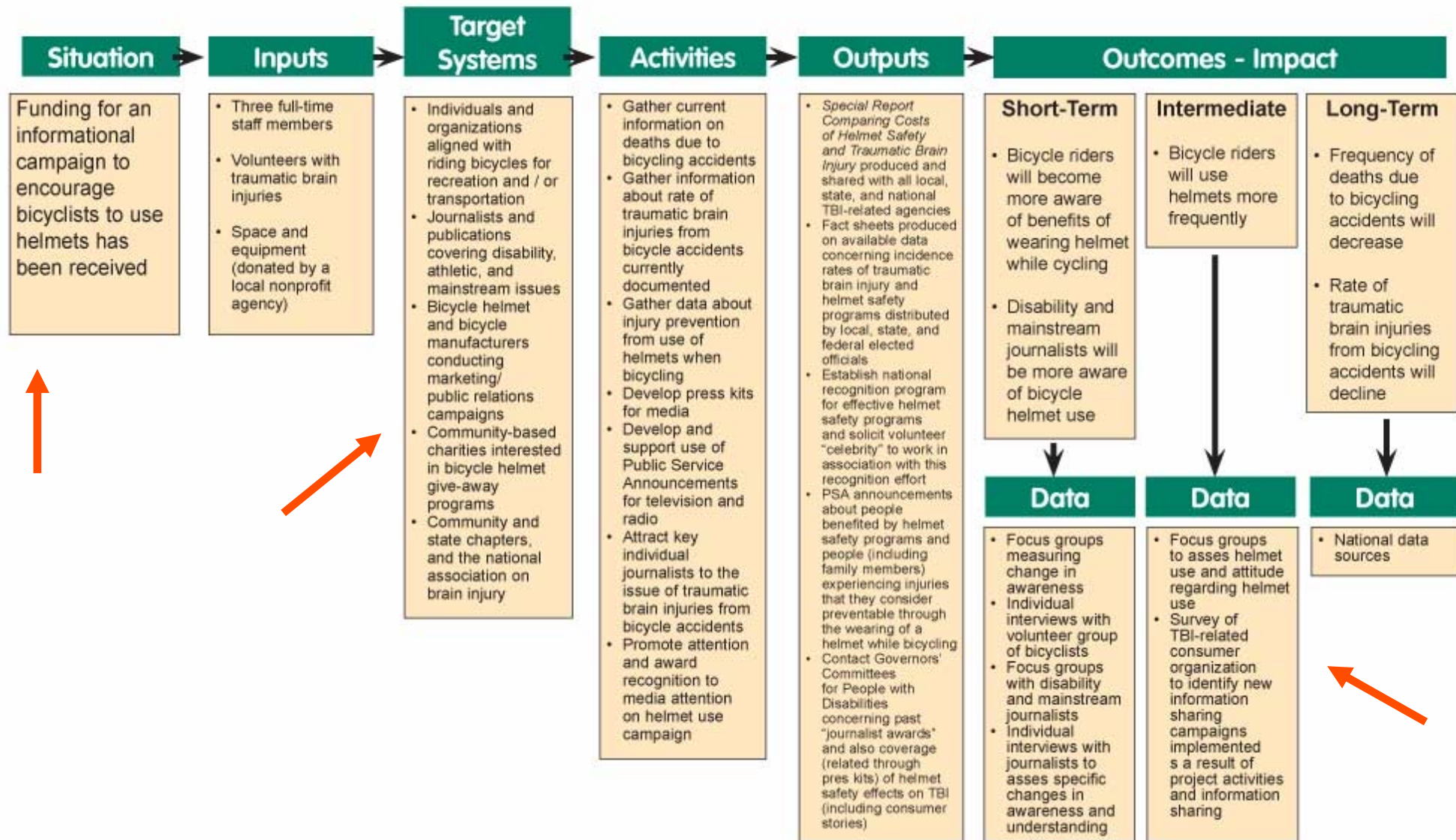


# LOGIC MODEL COMPONENTS

INPUTS → ACTIVITIES → OUTPUTS → OUTCOMES

- **Inputs:** Resources invested in the project
  - Personnel, Partners, Funding, Facilities, etc.
- **Activities:** Processes/actions the project will perform
  - Recruitment, Training, Marketing, Evaluation, etc.
- **Outputs:** Expected results from the project
  - Focus on program implementation
- **Outcomes:** Expected impact of the project
  - Focus on program effectiveness

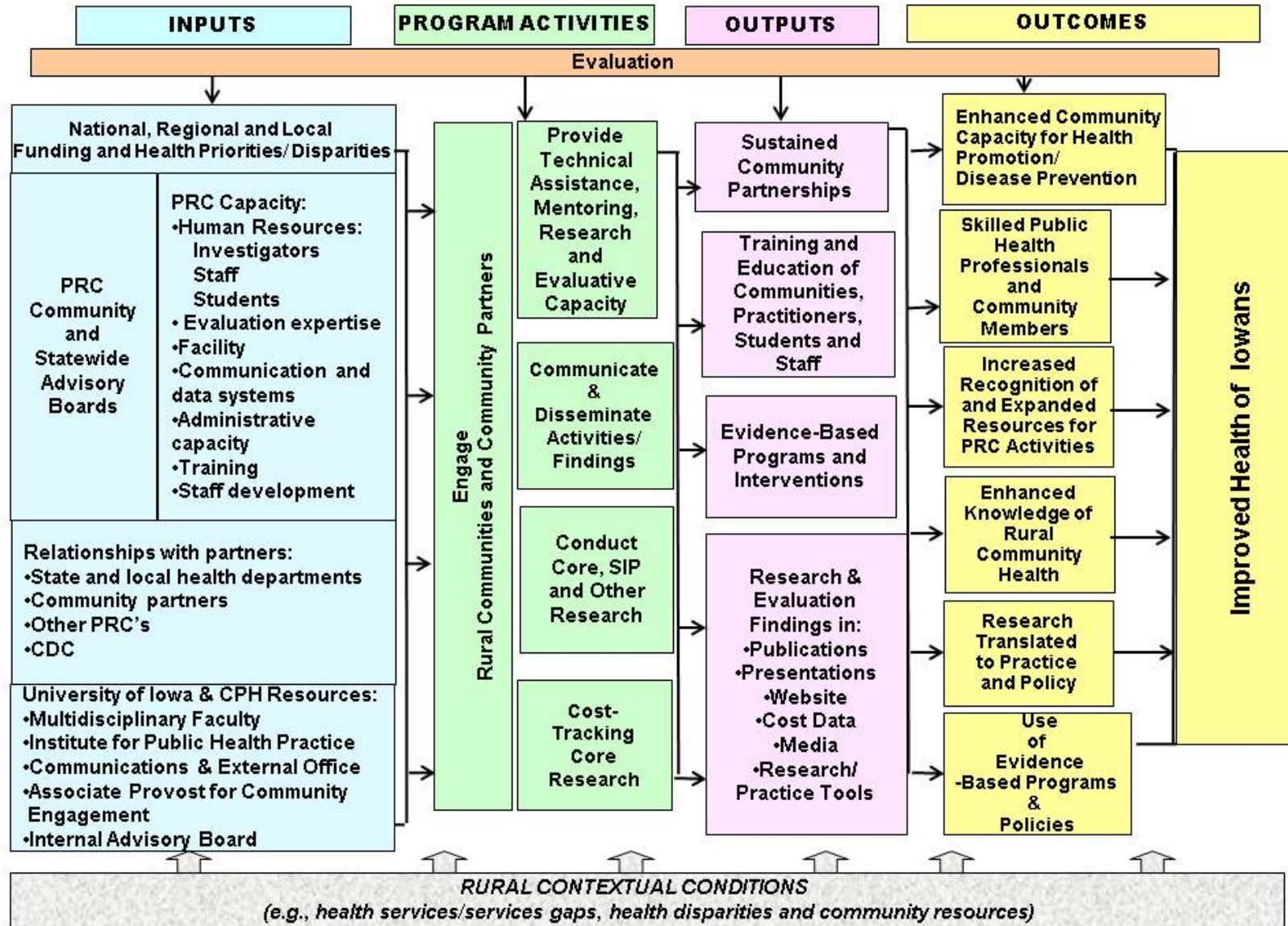
# EXAMPLE: BIKE HELMET AWARENESS



Source: [MD Governor's Grants Office](#)



# EXAMPLE: HEALTHIER IOWANS



Source: [Iowa Prevention Research Center](#)



Preliminary budgets help you through the entire proposal process.

*Don't procrastinate!*

## HOW WILL A BUDGET HELP WITH DESIGN?

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- Forces you to **reality test** what's possible
- Helps you consider **scaling and phasing** your project (one year pilot vs. multi-year implementation)
- Can be done with a specific **funder in mind** or as an **early-stage design exercise**

# BASIC BUDGET COMPONENTS

## BUILD A SIMPLE / ESTIMATED BUDGET EARLY

- Personnel
- Equipment (durable, long-lasting)
- Travel
- Participant / Trainee / Beneficiary Costs
- Materials and Supplies (expendable, short-term)
- Publication and Dissemination Costs
- Subawards
- Contractual
- Construction
- F&A / Indirect (note institution's policy + funder limitations)



**TAKING THE TIME TO THINK  
THROUGH YOUR PROJECT AT THE  
OUTSET CAN SAVE YOU SIGNIFICANT  
TIME IN THE LONG TERM.**





# CONCEPT PAPERS & PROGRAM OFFICER OUTREACH

# CONNECT WITH FUNDERS

Connecting with a funder at the concept stage allows you to:

- Introduce yourself, your work, and your concept.
- Solicit feedback on project alignment and funder interest.
- Verify funder priorities and preferences.
- Build your reputation with the funding agency or organization.
- Develop a long-term relationship to facilitate future funding.

*(Note that some funders prefer not to have contact before a formal proposal or letter of inquiry—always respect funder communication preferences. For those applying to NSF, PO outreach is ALWAYS a best practice!)*



# A QUICK POLL

Q1: Do you feel hesitant about reaching out to a program officer?

Q2: If yes, what is holding you back?

- A. They're busy and I don't want to bother them.
- B. I've tried before and didn't get a response/response wasn't helpful.
- C. It feels like cheating.
- D. It's scary.
- E. It's hard and I don't have time.

*Share additional hesitations in the chat!*

# OVERCOMING PO OUTREACH HESITANCY

- A. They're busy and I don't want to bother them.
- B. I've tried before and didn't get a response/  
response wasn't helpful.

- They are busy: do it anyway and do your homework.
- POs have an interest in building the award portfolio of their institute/organization.
- This happens.
- They're not all like that.
- It's still necessary.

# OVERCOMING PO OUTREACH HESITANCY

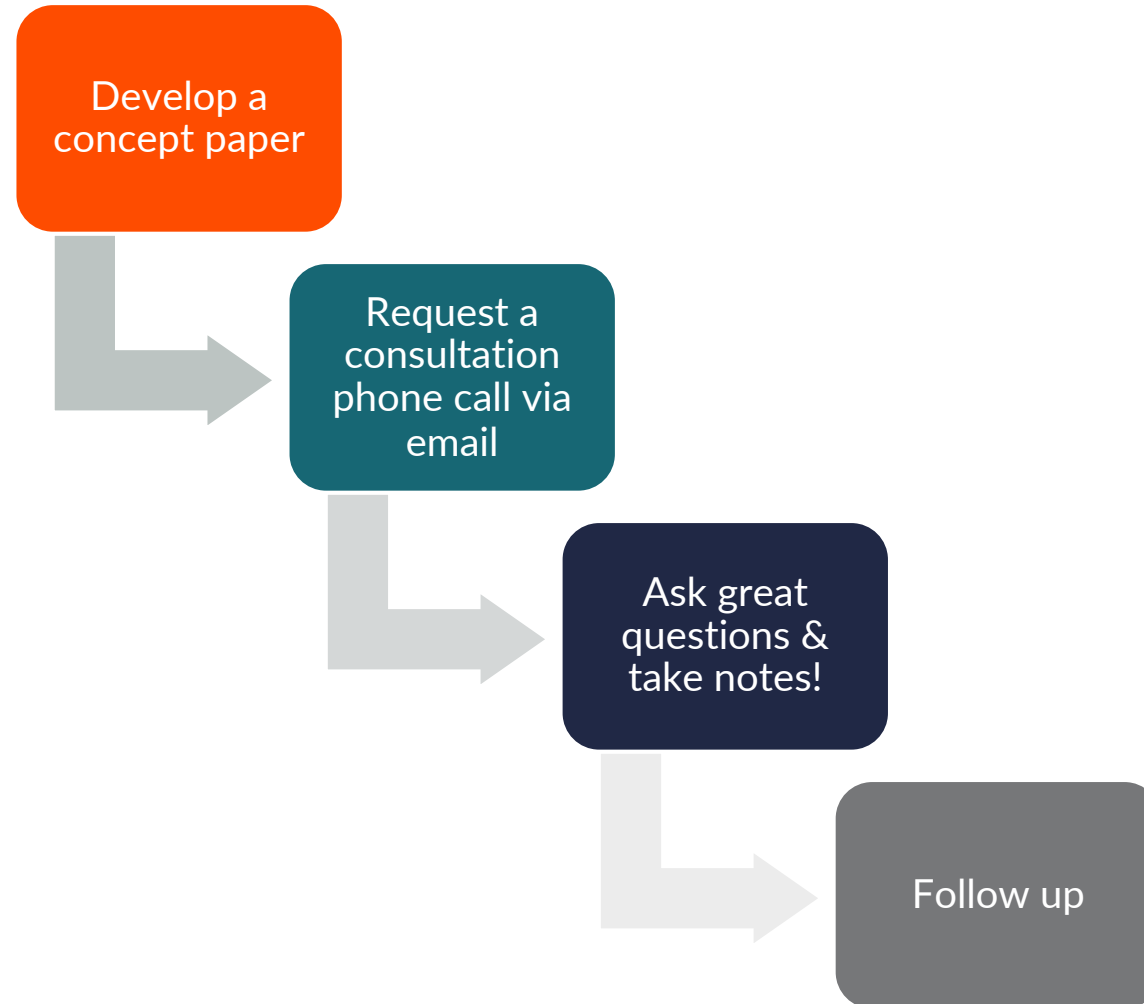
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- They are busy: do it anyway and do your homework.
- POs have an interest in building the award portfolio of their institute/organization.
- This happens.
- They're not all like that.
- It's still necessary.
  - NO! It's expected.
  - It doesn't need to be. Prepare in advance.
  - **What makes more sense? Taking the time to:**
    - a. Go through the concept paper & PO outreach process and prepare a competitive proposal, **OR**
    - b. Prepare and submit a proposal, only to find out that your project is not aligned with the opportunity or organization?



# THE PITCH

## CONCEPT PAPER



CUSTOMIZABLE TO SPECIFIC FUNDERS

# CREATE A “GENERAL” CONCEPT PAPER

Organize bullet points in categories (1-3 pages)

**Descriptive title** of your project

1. **Scientific rationale or Statement of Need**
2. **Overall hypothesis or goal**
3. **Specific objectives** – description short, medium, and long-term objectives, ideally measurable
4. **Research plan / approach** – description of the research or implementation plan with emphasis on any interdisciplinary methods; give an overall timeline
5. **Potential impact and expected outcomes** – description of anticipated findings, impacts on any students or stakeholders involved, and potential broader societal impacts
6. **Qualifications of the PI / Project Team** – include preliminary / pilot research and results if applicable
7. **Budget / Support** – may include a high-level estimate budget or request range; note any secured support



GRANTS

Adapted from: <https://nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource/AFRI-Letter-of-Intent-Instructions.pdf>

# TAILORED TO NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (NSF): PROJECT SUMMARY AS A MODIFIED CONCEPT PAPER

Organize bullet points in three categories that will become three paragraphs (1 page)

1. **Overview** – brief statement of the problem or knowledge gap, with a description of the proposed activities, including a statement of the objectives and methods to be used.
2. **Intellectual Merit**– describe the potential of the proposed activity to advance knowledge.
3. **Broader Impacts** – describe the potential of the proposed activity to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes





# REMEMBER, PO'S ARE BUSY!

Whether repurposing proposals or designing from scratch, give them a thoughtful document they can “digest” in 5 minutes or less.



# WHEN SHOULD I CONTACT A PO?

Reach out to POs in concept development stage, NOT:

- 2 weeks before the deadline
- After you've already written the proposal.

Ideally, 3–6 months ahead of the deadline.

If you don't hear back from PO, don't read too much into it.

- *Extra outreach may be needed.*

***Foundations: Check funder guidelines and cycles first!***

# CONNECT WITH FUNDERS

## Email content tips:

- The program you are applying to
- The title of your proposal
- 1–3 sentences summarizing your request
- 4–6 sentences summarizing your proposed project
- 2–3 sentences with your background and info about your research program
- 1–2 concluding sentences thanking the PO, offering to send your concept paper, and providing your availability for a call
- Provide your full contact information

**Keep your communication with the PO professional and respectful: remember, you are building your reputation.**



# SAMPLE EMAIL TO A PROGRAM OFFICER

Subject: Request for call to discuss XXX due on DATE

Dear Dr. X:

I am interested in submitting a proposal for program solicitation #XXX “Program Solicitation 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 / project summary and logic model] for you to review prior to our call. [If you have specific questions that you want the PO to consider, include them.]

[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 Information

# CONNECT WITH FUNDERS

You'll usually get a response within a week. Study it for tone as well as content.

- Was the response enthusiastic?
- Did the PO “get it”?
- Are there questions you need to answer during the call?
- Are there questions you need to ask during the call?

# CONCEPT PAPER DISCUSSION

**Always prepare questions before your meeting with the Program Officer.**

Common questions:

- Is this project a good fit 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?
- What are the usual success rates for this program?
- What is your preferred method for me to contact you if I have additional questions?

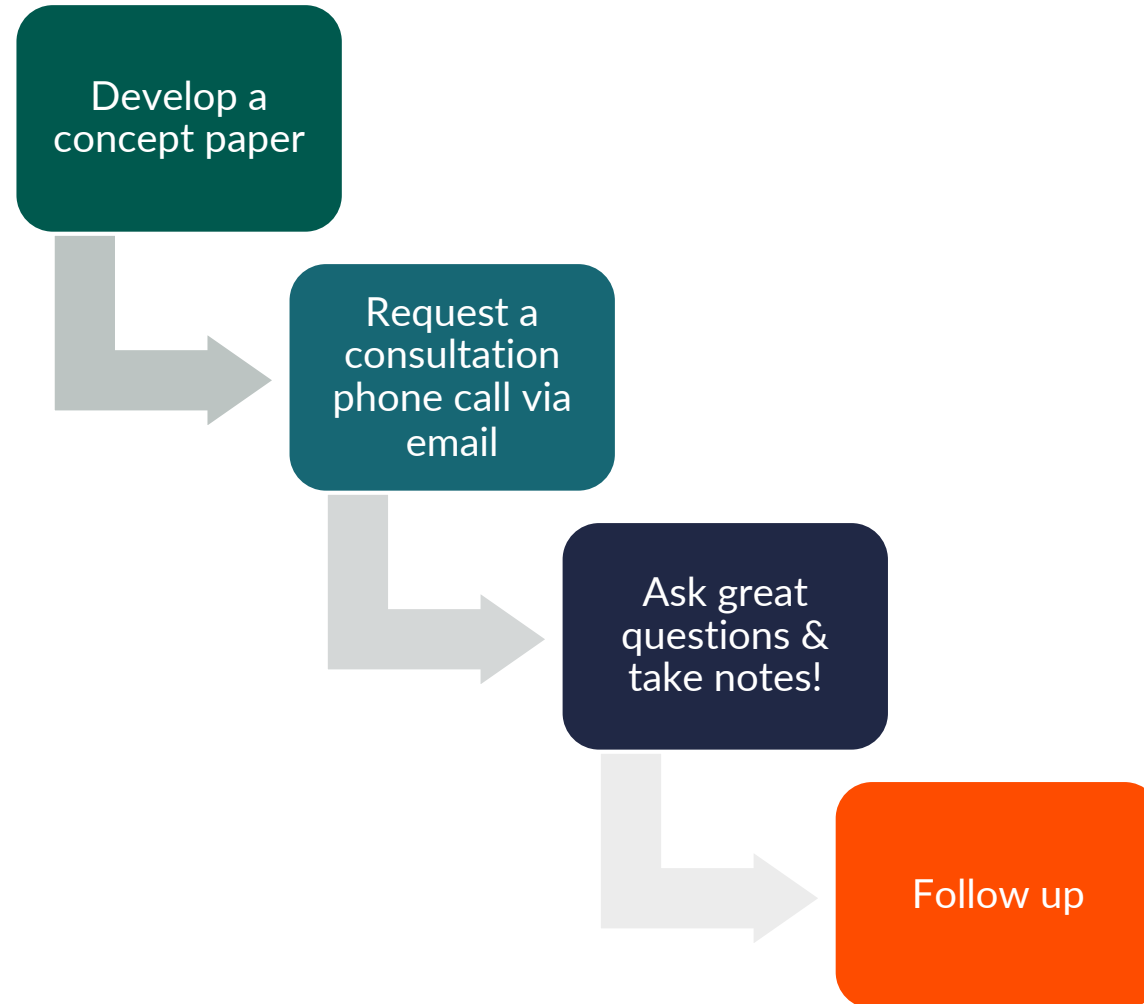


**REMEMBER TO SPEND AS  
MUCH TIME LISTENING AS  
TALKING!**



# THE PITCH

## CONCEPT PAPER



# CONNECT WITH FUNDERS

## Always follow up !

- 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.
- Use the subject line of your email to reflect the purpose and urgency of the request.
- Remember that Program Officers are very busy: **make things easy for them with clear, specific, actionable communication and a courteous tone.**



# RESOURCES

### LOGIC MODELS

- The **University of Wisconsin – Extension Program Development and Evaluation Unit** maintains a [Logic Model site](#), including templates and development guides.
- The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Program Performance and Evaluation Office (PPEO)** offers tips on [Logic Models](#).
- For private grants, the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** [Logic Model Development Guide](#) is a key resource.

### CONCEPT PAPERS AND PO OUTREACH

- [The Anatomy of a Specific Aims Page](#)
- [NSF 101: 5 tips for working with an NSF Program Officer](#)

**QUESTIONS?**





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