



# Letters of Support for a Research Grant Proposal

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## ■ Introduction

An important and often underestimated part of a research grant proposal is the letter of support. Letters of support are not part of the research plan that forms the body of the grant proposal but are included in the Appendix. Their placement in the Appendix should not be interpreted as designating unimportance, however. Letters of support convey information that may be a deciding factor for awarding grant funding when 2 proposals are otherwise similar in quality and merit. When skillfully written, they can bolster the significance or innovation of the proposed research and provide assurance of the feasibility of the research plan. Their inclusion shows that the investigator has made an effort to prepare a complete proposal and is ready to start the project when it is awarded. This article describes the different purposes of letters of support that commonly accompany a research grant proposal and explain how to request them from professional colleagues.

## ■ Purposes of Letters of Support

### *Significance of the Study*

The most common purpose of a letter of support is a testimony by someone other than the investigator that the study is a "great idea." The savvy investigator will be strategic in his or her selection of the writer of this letter. A letter that attests to the value of the potential contribution of the proposed study or its innovativeness from a recognized leader in the field, an expert on the topic, or someone knowledgeable about the gap in the science and literature that the proposed study addresses can influence a reviewer's opinion. The reason for this influence is the reality that not all grant reviewers can know everything about every topic, and they often appreciate the perspective of significance from a credible source. The writers might relate the proposed research to the priority areas of their nursing specialty, for example. Two ways the principal investigator (PI) can become acquainted with leaders in an area in which they are interested in doing research is to network at national professional meeting, such as the WOCN Society conference, or volunteer for society activities and committees in which these leaders also participate.

Stakeholders who might benefit from the findings of the study can also testify to the importance of the study in

a letter of support. For example, a letter from a patient organization such as the United Ostomy Association stating that the findings of a study about ways to prevent leakage from an ostomy appliance is what its members have been seeking and will improve their quality of life offers a compelling context to the study's significance.

### *Qualifications of the PI*

Another purpose of a letter of support is to attest to the PI's qualifications to successfully conduct the study. Experienced investigators summarize their preliminary work and have publications as evidence of their skills. A letter of support for this purpose is especially relevant for the novice researcher or an investigator entering a new area of study. Examples of individuals who could write this type of letter are a supervisor of the PI or someone who has worked with the PI on another study or project that required similar skills and effort needed for the proposed study.

The writers of both of these letters of support should explain their expertise or stakeholder status. They should frame their enthusiasm about the study within a context that relates to their expertise. The PI should carefully select the writers after determining ahead of time that they can support the study with a high level of excitement.

### *Administrative Approval to Conduct the Study*

Every research proposal that requires permission from another person, department, organization, or institution for some aspect of the proposal should contain a letter of support that clearly states the PI has approval from the appropriate authority to do so. Examples include permission to conduct the study at a particular health care institution, including the PI's place of employment, to recruit patients from a clinical site, such as by distributing a survey to patients when they visit a clinic, or to review patient records or charts. If more than 1 institution or site will participate in the study, then a letter from each site is needed unless they share the same administration. The writers of these letter of support should make known their professional

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position and explain that they possess the authority to grant the permission sought by the PI. This assurance strengthens the feasibility of the study because the administrative approval necessary to conduct the research has been granted. No funder wants to award a grant to a PI if there is a risk that the PI will later inform it that he or she is unable to obtain administrative approval to conduct the study. A statement in the letter indicating the potential value of the study would be an added benefit, but the approval is the critical component of this letter. The novice investigator must remember that administrative approval is different from ethical approval from an institutional review board and, in most institutions, it requires a separate step. Both types of approval are needed to implement a study.

### **Agreement of Consultants to Participate**

Finally, a letter of support/agreement should be obtained from all consultants to the proposed study. In this letter, these consultants should state their understanding of the study and describe their expertise and contribution to the study. They should also comment on the importance of the study and why they were attracted to participate in it. These letters add credibility to the knowledge resources and collaborative efforts the PI claims that he or she has arranged and will utilize in the study. Letters from consultants, those documenting approval to conduct the study and those expressing support for the idea of the study addressed to the PI should also be obtained. If a letter is to be addressed to the funding agency, the PI should provide the complete contact information to the writer.

### **Requesting a Letter of Support**

Although the initial request for a letter of support is frequently done by personal contact, a written follow-up is highly recommended. The written request will increase the likelihood that the letter will contain the focus desired in time to meet the grant deadline. The written request for a letter of support should state the following information: the grant being sought, date letter is requested, type of support requested, and the reason the writer was selected to write the letter. The request might include a reminder to the writers to use their letterhead and whether a faxed or e-mailed image of the letter and signature (vs original) is acceptable.

Providing the writers with an abstract or 1-page summary of the study, including its aims, methods, design, and expected outcomes, is essential; the full proposal should be sent only if requested. Therefore, letters should be requested after the aims and methods are finalized, even though writing or refining the proposal may still be in process. Optimally, the PI can provide the title of the study to the writers to include in their letter. However, if the title is not determined, providing key terms that might be used in the title and describe the study is recommended. For example, knowing a study aims to reduce

fecal incontinence in nursing home residents by instituting a toileting program may be sufficient.

Offering a draft of a letter to the writer as a sample to follow is a common courtesy. Tufts University offers a guide for writing a letter of support<sup>1</sup> that may assist the novice investigator to draft a sample letter. The guideline describes that the opening should convey interest in and enthusiasm for the study; the body should explain the purpose of the letter, the support being provided, and the reason the writer is the best/appropriate person to offer the support; and the ending should be a cordial closing. Adding a few parenthetical suggestions to the body of sample letter at places where the writer might customize his or her statements can facilitate a more unique sounding letter. This is important when several letters of support will be included. On its Web site,<sup>2</sup> Indiana University provides a template for a letter of support and some example letters.

Allowing the writer 3 to 4 weeks for writing the letter is another courtesy, but the PI is recommended to confirm which colleagues will agree to write a letter much farther in advance. This lead time is critical if a paper copy of the letter with the original signatures of the writer is needed. If a grant proposal is resubmitted, the PI should ask the writers of the letters of support to send a new letter with a recent date. Requesting letters of support is typically one of the responsibilities of the PI. Coinvestigators or other colleagues who have associations with the individual from whom a letter is desired can be instrumental in obtaining a letter by providing the PI with an introduction.

Few instructions to investigators elaborate on letters of support other than stating they are permitted and should be placed in the Appendix. The novice grant proposal writer, rushed in completing the research plan, may underestimate the importance of a letter of support or overlook them and miss the benefit that it provides. Letters of support can serve several essential purposes that strengthen the competitiveness of a grant proposal. These purposes include attesting to the significance of the study or the qualifications of the PI, confirming that the study is feasible in the sense that the necessary administrative approval for conducting the study has been obtained, and demonstrating that consultants have agreed to participate. Extending professional courtesy to the writers of letters of support by providing background material about the study, adequate notice of the deadline, and even a sample letter, for example, will facilitate the timely submission and quality content of letters.

## **References**

1. Tufts University, Office of Proposal Development, Office of the Vice Provost. How to write an effective letter of support. <http://grantwriting.tufts.edu/?pid=19>. Accessed November 1, 2009.
2. Indiana University. Letters of support. <http://p16center.educ.indiana.edu/sites/p16/research/boilerplate/Pages/LetterofSupport.aspx>. Accessed November 1, 2009.