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A Guide to Writing Successful Field-Initiated Research Grant Proposals

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Overview

Spencer's Field-Initiated Research Grants Programs support rigorous, intellectually ambitious, and technically sound research that is relevant to the most pressing questions and compelling opportunities for improvement in education.

Through these programs, the Spencer Foundation seeks to support research focused on topics or issues related to learning or education, broadly conceived, and that have critical importance for it. It aims to support research that contributes new understandings using innovative approaches, theory, and/or methods.

Proposals are evaluated based on several criteria including the significance of the project relative to education; how effectively relevant research literature and theory are used to justify and situate the proposed work's potential contributions; and the overall quality, sophistication, and appropriateness of the research design and analysis plan and their alignment with the research question(s) and conceptual framing.

Spencer also considers the adequacy and feasibility of the proposed budget and timeline, the potential of the team to complete the study as described and share results or other findings, and how projects support the professional and scholarly growth of their team members.

1.1 Field-Initiated

The Spencer Field-Initiated Research Grant Programs are open and field-initiated, rather than foundation-initiated. In other words, Spencer does not define specific research topics or methods in requests for proposals.

The choice of both topic and method for a study is left up to each researcher, or principal investigator (PI). In drafting a compelling proposal, PIs need to explain their research topic and research design clearly and make a persuasive and well-substantiated argument for the significance, appropriateness, and feasibility of the proposed project.

1.2 Topics and Methods

Spencer strives to fund robust proposals for research related to education, regardless of the specific topic, discipline, or methodological approach. Investigators from all disciplines can submit proposals across a range of educational research topics. Spencer recognizes that learning occurs across the life course as well as across settings—from the classroom to the workplace, to family and community contexts, and even onto the playing field—any of which may, in the right circumstance, provide the basis for a rewarding study that makes significant contributions to research in education. Research proposals will span a wide range of topics and disciplines that innovatively investigate questions central to education.

These research proposals can be grounded in any number of disciplinary fields including, but not limited to, education, anthropology, communications, comparative and international studies, economics, ethnic studies/American studies, history, law, neuroscience, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, and many other fields. Moreover, research proposals often represent methodological diversity in answering pressing questions.

Thus, projects that utilize a wide array of research methods, including quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, ethnographies, design-based research, participatory methods, archival research, and other methods are all welcome. Proposals are also accepted for projects that might incorporate data from multiple and varied sources, span an appropriate length of time to achieve a depth of understanding, or work closely with practitioners or community members over the life of the project.

Additionally, Spencer is interested in proposals for projects that create spaces and opportunities for scholarly development of research team members, as well as consider how study implications could influence practice, policymaking, and/or the general public. As such, proposals submitted by multidisciplinary and multigenerational teams who are positioned to both contribute to the project as well as contribute to the teaching and learning of fellow team members are welcome.

Finally, recognizing the field's interest in generating research for public impact, Spencer also supports projects in which investigators thoughtfully consider the trajectories of their findings, including the implications and potential impacts of their research. This includes considering how their research may be shared and utilized in education—in practice, in policymaking, or with the broader public.

1.3 Considerations: Review, PI Eligibility, Funding Parameters

Specific proposal elements, eligibility requirements, and review processes vary depending on the grant program. As such, please read the most updated guidelines for the program of interest, found on each program's web page:

• Large Research Grants
• Research-Practice Partnership (RPP) Grants
• Small Research Grants
• Across these grant programs, Spencer does not fund the following activities:
   • Scholarships
   • Curriculum development
   • Program development and implementation
   • Program or curriculum evaluation
   • Professional development programs

However, research on professional development programs or evaluation activities can be eligible for funding if the research goes beyond whether a particular educational effort was successful or not and if it instead offers a clear advancement or contribution to research.

2.0
Proposing Field-Initiated Research

The idea of proposing field-initiated research can be both exhilarating and daunting. Proposal writing is a blend of academic writing and persuasive writing. Each year, Spencer is only able to fund between 5 and 10 percent of the proposals received. In drafting a proposal, PIs are tasked with both making a strong case for the line of inquiry and outlining a rigorous, high-quality approach for advancing knowledge along that line. The proposal arguments should be clear, detailed, precise, and accessible. The reviewers are knowledgeable about the proposal topic and/or methods.

The following sections offer insights on the following key components of a research proposal:

• Project significance
• Connection to existing research and theory
• Research design

2.1 Project Significance

Persuasive proposals have a clear focus of inquiry, with specific research questions and/or hypotheses. Proposed research projects must focus on topics or issues related to learning or education. These topics and issues should have critical significance to education, broadly conceived. Additionally, there should be a clear and compelling set of research questions or line of inquiry related to these topics and issues.

Research investigators often choose to focus on topics or issues for a variety of reasons. Frequently, investigators focus their attention on a topic that is currently under-studied, arguing that the proposed research will produce significant new knowledge, insights, and scholarly contributions. Some investigators propose studies that take up important, emerging trends in education (e.g., digital literacy, online learning). Others address topics that have been previously studied (e.g., class size, grouping), about which there are significant disagreements over policy, practice, or theoretical orientations. In such proposals, investigators may identify unexpected, puzzling, or contradictory relationships, or counterintuitive findings that warrant additional research attention, taking advantage of new methods or perspectives.

Regardless of topic, it is important to cue readers to the centrality of education in your proposal by writing about how the topic or issue is represented in educational research literature, or how knowing more about the topic or issue may inform educational practice or policy, confirming or disconfirming existing paradigms or conventional assumptions. The significance of the topic or issue depends upon the extent to which the research question or line of inquiry advances knowledge on related research and theory.

For example, suppose the research project examined the underrepresentation of women of color in graduate-level computer science courses. This is an issue that is clearly within the realm of education. Moreover, it is an issue that warrants attention. However, what makes the issue significant, in the context of the proposal, is that the research questions and line of inquiry offer a path forward for better understanding the underrepresentation of women of color in graduate-level computer science courses.

Questions to Consider:

• What are you studying?
• Why are you studying it?
• What can be learned from the study?

Tips and Insights:

• Identify a specific topic or issue related to education or learning and explain why it is important to know more about it.
• Explain how the project will improve theory, policy, or practice in education, contributing to new knowledge.
• Make explicit the connections between the topic or issue and broader themes or ideas in the field of education.
• If your project focuses on a specific program, policy, or practice, describe it in detail and explain how studying this program, policy, or practice can yield new knowledge and contributions to research.

Common Mistakes

• Projects are not expressly research studies, and request funding for activities outside of Spencer parameters (e.g., request for funding book writing, curriculum or technology development, technology purchases, philanthropic support for nonprofits or other service providers, program evaluations).
• Projects are not clearly connected to education.

2.2 Connection to Research and Theory

Persuasive proposals make a compelling rationale for the study, situating the project in relevant research literature. An incisive and concise literature review should provide an overview of what is already known and indicate what we still need to learn or accomplish – thus, carving out your anticipated contribution to educational research. To this end, a succinct literature review should present a discussion of relevant research studies and theoretical frameworks that are most closely related to the topic, highlighting important gaps or disagreements in current knowledge that warrant further study, to identify how the proposed study will offer a contribution—a scholarly intervention or advancement to the field.

In an interdisciplinary field like education research, multiple literatures are often pertinent and necessary to acknowledge, thus presenting a challenge for organizing a discussion of relevant research and theory. One approach is to focus on bodies of literature, schools of thought, and authors that are most centrally related to the proposed study research topic. Use less space on studies and perspectives that, while they may inform work somewhat, are less crucial to it than studies and perspectives that receive primary emphasis in the discussion. The review of literature should be selective, showing clearly what is central to the proposal and what is more peripheral.

Lastly, the proposal should present a theoretical or conceptual framework that explains any key relationships in the project and/or informs the approach for examining the topic or issue. This is particularly important when the study is exploring a question by looking at a specific intervention or program, such as through case study methodology. Some investigators can incorporate their theoretical or conceptual framework into their review of literature, while for others it is easier to have it as a separate but related section of their proposal.

Questions to Consider:

- What is it that we know? What is it that we don't know? And how is this problematic?
- What are the major theories or frameworks that help us make sense of this topic or issue or change our current understanding of this topic or issue?

Tips and Insights:

- Describe, cite, and comment on the current state of research knowledge around the study topic or issue and how the research questions or line of inquiry are related to that current state of knowledge.
- Reflect on how the findings may influence the existing knowledge base, capacity to improve education, and/or key assumptions in the field.
- Define key conceptual terms and avoid jargon (when possible).
- If the project focuses on a specific program, policy, or practice, explain the theoretical and empirical rationale for why studying that particular program, policy, or practice is likely to produce the anticipated outcome of new knowledge.

Common Mistakes

- An overly broad and long review of literature.
- Little or no discussion of research literature.
- Little or no discussion of relevant theory.

2.3 Research Design

Compelling proposals describe and provide a convincing rationale for the research design. A sound research design is central to set up a project well to yield findings that are of value. However, different investigators may approach their study with different, equally valid designs. Therefore, it is important to be clear in explaining the research design, making explicit justification for the choices among alternative conceptions and procedures. In other words, explain how the research design is purposeful and well-suited to the research questions and lines of inquiry. Additionally, clearly explain the data—an existing data set or new data—or evidence that will be used in the project, access to the data, and the planned methods for data analysis.

Different approaches may require attention to different sources of evidence. For example, in an ethnographic participant observational research study, it is important to communicate information about such things as the specific data collection methods planned, the research site and why it is an appropriate place for the study, key participants, spaces, or interactions for observation, and site documents or other artifacts to be collected. Alternatively, in a statistical analysis of a large existing dataset, it is important to specify such things as the construction of the dataset, sample size, and key variables. Regardless of approach, a description of key concepts under investigation and how they are operationalized in the study or observed in the data collection should be presented. This may mean explaining all the data collection tools and protocols, and providing them in an appendix.

Similarly, analytic methods should be clearly explained, showing how data will be used to answer the proposed research questions, to consider competing interpretations of evidence, and to rule out certain interpretations or conclusions as less warranted by evidence than others. Take care to show how the analytic techniques will lead to clear and usable findings. In some cases, research methods and design require analytic plans to develop in-situ (e.g., design-based research, research-practice partnerships, participatory action research). In this case, please describe as specifically as possible how evidence will be gathered and evaluated.

Questions to Consider:

- What is your approach to research and how does this approach align with your research questions or line of inquiry?
- What data are you looking at, why are you looking at it, and how are you collecting or accessing it?
- How does your theoretical or conceptual framework inform your research design?

Tips and Insights:

- Remember that different methodological approaches may require attention to different things.
- Describe the analytic methods and explain how the data will be used to answer the proposed research questions and/or support the direction of inquiry.

Common Mistakes

- Little or no explanation for why specific methodological choices have been made.
- Not including sample size, or descriptions of research sites, participants, or recruitment criteria.
- Not describing protocols or survey items, variables included in models.
- Limited or no information about any intervention in the study.
- Limited or no analysis plan.

3.0 Bringing it All Togther

While each component of the proposal is important, it is equally important that they are aligned with one another, and that the proposal shows those connections explicitly.

At the same time, proposal structures may vary based on disciplinary traditions and approaches to research. Nevertheless, throughout the proposal, there should be a demonstrated alignment and consistency across all the proposal's components. The key challenge is finding a way to strike an appropriate balance between all of the proposal's components and making sure they are connected and in alignment.

4.0 Figures and Tables

Visual representations are often helpful tools for explaining complex ideas and conceptual relationships. They can be included when appropriate. However, they should not take the place of text. Each chart, graph, table, or other visual representation, whether they be in the narrative or included as an appendix, should be clearly labeled, and explained in the narrative text of the proposal.

5.0 Additional Sections

In addition to the components discussed above, the project team, budget, and timeline also communicate critical project information.

Project Team
A research project team is also a key component necessary for the completion of a study and sharing of results or other findings. Therefore, it important to communicate how the PI(s) and, when relevant, a research team have substantive knowledge about the topics or issues in the project as well as experience with proposed research methods. This can be communicated through the description of the team and curriculum vitae.

Budget
When developing the budget, please think of everything needed for the project. This may include a range of things from software to research assistants' time to travel for data collection or conferences. Project budgets should be reasonable and aligned with the proposed project.

Timeline
The project timeline should include key project activities discussed in the proposal narrative. Be generous with the project timeline.

6.0 Additional Resources

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William T. Grant Foundation (n.d.). Annotated excerpts from successful proposals [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2016/04/Annotated-Excerpts-of-Successful-Proposals.pdf.

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