

Developing a Concept Paper for a Corporate or Foundation Funder

Obtaining research support from a corporate or foundation donor is something of an art. Many put out requests for proposals (RFPs) on a regular basis, which provide an obvious entry point for a conversation about funding.

Many others either do not use RFPs, or allocate significant portions of their funding to projects and principle investigators (PIs) with whom they have relationships outside of any formalized RFP processes they might run. Not always, but often enough to be worth noting, these more informal relationships can yield higher levels of support for the researcher, so they're worth cultivating whenever the opportunity is right.

Once "the ice is broken" with a potential funder – through a personal encounter, introduction via an institution's development staff, professional contact, etc. – they will want to get a sense of the nature and scope of the research project and how it aligns with their own priorities, as well as the amount of money it will take to conduct. Other relevant considerations could include things like potential partners, community-level impacts, and potential contributions of the research to the field. One common mechanism for communicating this information with them is through a "Concept Paper."

Similar to a Letter of Intent/Inquiry (LOI) but more typically requested in conjunction with funding decisions made outside of a formalized funding opportunity, a concept paper usually includes the following components:

Title: Your title should be easy to understand and accurately reflect what you are attempting to do.

Introduction: This section provides an overview for your ideas. It is typically one paragraph (three or four sentences) and summarizes the key points of your program. It should include a sentence stating what support you are seeking and why, and another that identifies the main purpose of the project. The introduction should be very compelling—clear and to the point. Do not use abbreviations or jargon.

Rationale: Briefly describe the problem you seek to address, the constituents you hope to serve, and the importance of the issue. Do not assume that the reader understands the situation. Provide enough detail to substantiate your claims, including statistical or comparative data, and qualitative information.

Discuss other efforts to solve the problem and how your project will fill a gap in services or knowledge. If you are proposing a national project, use evidence that supports a national emphasis. If your project is local or regional, you might discuss both the national and local trends and data. In making your case, begin with broad ideas and then bring it home with a rationale that addresses your targeted area specifically. CFR: Developing a Concept Paper–2011

Organization: Include a brief paragraph that describes your organization’s capabilities, the expertise of individuals involved in the project, and the institutional capacity to achieve the stated goals.

Project Description: Briefly describe what you propose to do. Focus on goals versus specific objectives. Include statements that address innovation or uniqueness in your approach. Describe the compelling reasons to fund this work at this time. Give time frames for implementation and describe any agencies that will be partners in your idea. You should also include a brief statement on how you will evaluate the program to determine that it has met its objectives.

Budget: A concept paper does not typically need a full budget. Include a general statement that gives the total expected expenditure, and the main use of the funds. For example, “The total cost of the XYZ program is projected to be \$100,000, which will cover funds for two conferences, development of marketing materials, and salary for the program coordinator.”

Summary: It is best to begin the concept paper with the project description and end with a summary statement that reiterates the importance of the project and its impact. You may also wish to relate your proposed program to the stated interests of the funder. State who will follow up and ask for a phone conversation and/or face to face meeting to include the appropriate campus leadership or project director. If you are emailing this concept paper, include relevant links to your organization.