

Getting to Know Your Program Officer

*Insider Tips to Build a Strong Relationship
with Your PO & Maximize Your Funding Chances*



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Knowing Your Program Officer Contributes to Funding Success

by Christopher Francklyn, PhD

While reading a science blog recently, I was struck by a principal investigator's comment that he had never spoken to his National Institutes of Health (NIH) Program Officer (PO).

This took me aback, because I've always considered my NIH PO to be (with the possible exception of my department chair) the individual with the greatest potential influence over the success of my program.

Simply put, POs represent the critical link between your individual research effort and the immense scientific apparatus of NIH or the National Science Foundation (NSF).

If you understand what they can and cannot do for you, and are willing to look beyond their occasional need to deliver you some bad news along with the good, they can influence your career in many significant and positive ways. If you haven't taken the time to build a relationship with them, it will be that much harder for them to go to bat for you when you need them.

We should start by comparing in general terms the respective roles of POs in the NIH and NSF:

NIH officers and their roles

In the NIH, the Scientific Review Officer (SRO) and PO are separate jobs, each held by full-time government employees. SROs, who work for the Center for Scientific Review (CSR), manage one or more study sections and thus are mainly responsible for ensuring that your grant application is reviewed fairly and expertly.

While the study section(s) and SRO managers may have a single focus, applications submitted for a single meeting may span several of the NIH institutes.

By contrast, your NIH Program Officer (PO) works for just one of the many NIH institutes, both through contributions to defining the strategic mission of the institute, and serving as the critical liaison between applicants/awardees and institute program staff. NIH POs are trained scientists themselves, and they manage the programmatic, scientific, and technical aspects of a "portfolio" of grants appropriate to their own scientific expertise.

In addition to providing consultation before your grant is submitted, they will assist you in interpreting your reviewers' summary statement and your reviewing scores. Notably, **POs can have a significant role in determining whether you will be funded.** If you receive an award, the PO is the one who actually reads all those non-competing progress reports you'll be writing.

NSF officers and their roles

The broad categories of science that NSF supports are called “Directorates” (analogous to NIH institutes in most respects), subdivided into “Divisions” which are populated with Program Officers (POs). As in the case of NIH, all POs possess a specific category of scientific expertise, and this dictates the collection of grants they will supervise. Unlike the NIH, however, NSF POs have the triple responsibility of managing the review panel that judges the applications, making recommendations about funding based on reviewer scores, and helping awardees manage their grants. Thus, in the NSF, the jobs of SRO and PO are merged into one position, the NSF Program Officer.

A further distinction from NIH, where POs are permanent government employees, is that NSF Program Officers are drawn from the ranks of both permanent government employees and temporary employees. The latter are referred to as “rotators” in NSF parlance, and actually are successful PIs from academic institutions on one- to three-year leaves to work at NSF.

For both NIH and NSF, building a relationship with your Program Officer **is a key step in aligning your scientific interests with the strategic mission of the NIH Institute or the NSF Directorate.**

In the following sections, we’ll explore some of the specifics of this relationship mostly in the context of the NIH — but most of what is presented will hold true for relationships with NSF Program Officers as well.

Actually, owing to their role in both the review process and the decision to make awards, NSF program staff have a commensurately larger footprint on your ultimate program success — so it is even more important to build a strong working relationship with them.

Your relationship with your PO

The first introduction many PIs have to their NIH PO is when they receive their Summary Statement. The PO’s name is found in the upper lefthand corner, under “Program Contact.” Naturally, we all experience a range of emotions when reading summary statements, from the euphoric high of a clearly fundable score, to the deep depression associated with an unscored application. Between these extremes, there is the stomach-churning score that lands on the margin between unfunded/funded. A score in this range virtually guarantees that you’ll be in funding limbo for the next nine months.

Your PO serves you in different capacities, depending on these outcomes. If your proposal scores poorly, the PO as your chief NIH point of contact helps to interpret the study section’s comments and guides you toward a higher quality resubmission.

The POs often sit in on study-section meetings, quietly making notes about the reviews. If your application is discussed and doesn’t receive a fundable score, your PO may help extend the written comments by providing information about the context of the review.

They can often gauge whether the panel balked over specific experiments in your plan, or (more seriously) expressed a profound absence of enthusiasm for your overall program. (You will certainly need to know which scenario applies.) If your grant received a fundable score, then you are in the enviable position of waiting for the “golden phone call,” when the PO calls to congratulate you. Don’t expect this call until after the Institute Council meeting, which can be months after your grant is reviewed.

Grants that score “on the margin” create what is likely the most awkward situation for the PO, because he/she won’t be able to give you a firm statement about the likelihood of an award until the entire institute funding process has run the gamut.

Such decisions reflect the ultimate relationship of your grant to the institute payline, which NIH officially defines as “a percentile-based funding cutoff point determined by balancing the projected number of applications coming to an NIH institute with the amount of funds available. Set after the budget is determined, paylines are not mandatory, are not made for all mechanisms, and may be adjusted during the year.”

Additional roles of POs

POs are involved in a broader range of activities in the management of the science in a particular NIH institute (or NSF directorate) than many PIs might appreciate. Owing to the knowledge gained by administering the numerous grants in scientific portfolios, NIH POs advise the institute director on scientific direction and priorities, which for PIs may be reflected by the appearance of Institute-specific Requests for Applications (RFAs) and other funding opportunity announcements that focus on scientific question or approach.

Each NIH institute has its own rubric for deciding which applications receive an award, but the three most important considerations are 1) the priority score of the application; 2) programmatic considerations (strategic priorities and balance); and 3) the amount of funding left over.

Grants that receive a priority score and/or percentile ranking are compiled to form a list that undergoes a second round of review by the institute’s council/advisory board. For the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), and likely for other Institutes, the secondary review of individual applications occurs in closed session. (As an example, see info about the NIGMS council process here: <https://www.nigms.nih.gov/about/council/Pages/councilmeetingsandfunctions.aspx>).

For applications that pass the scientific review group, the council can take a number of potential actions, including concurring or disagreeing with the study section’s recommendations, or advising changes in the length and amount of support.

POs attend these meetings, contributing to the discussion of individual applications and “programmatic concerns” that reflect the overall strategic mission of the institute.

Based on the experiences of my peers, the council meeting is vital for applications “on the margin.” If your application should fall in that range, **it is particularly important to arm your PO with the freshest, most up-to-date information about your research immediately prior to the council meeting; news of major discoveries, significant papers accepted, etc., can increase your chances of funding.**

Stay in touch with your PO

This brings us to the key advice about POs:

Communicate with them often, and not just when you need to find out if your grant is going to be funded. They can help **before you even write the application** by providing feedback about whether the project falls within the strategic priorities of the institute and, if so, what would be the most appropriate funding mechanism to use.

After your grant is funded, they can help you with Administrative Supplements and other special requests, like moving to other institutions. If you are contemplating special mechanisms like a program project grant, a conference award, or a planned budget in excess of \$500,000, you will need their permission in advance to submit the application.

As part of the non-competing progress report process, do alert them to particularly important papers and discoveries.

Seek out your PO at scientific meetings so they can assign a face to your file.

Finally, be sensitive to their roles in the institute (or directorate) as arbiters of funding decisions and appreciate that they have to be responsive to scientific priorities that are bigger than your individual research program.

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How to Develop a Beneficial Dialogue With a Program Officer

PIs have to be more than just strong grant writers to get their research funded. They also should have certain relational skills that allow them to successfully establish an ongoing dialogue with NIH and NSF program officers (POs) to seek advice, find out about funding trends, and determine time and funding limits.

“The main reason that you contact the program officer is to make sure your ideas are in tune with the agency’s current funding trends,” says Dr. Charlie Senn, director of proposal management, Office of Research at the University of Tennessee. “You are looking for signals that you might be heading down the wrong path.”

“You don’t want to put hours or weeks of effort into a proposal when a five-minute conversation would let you know you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Program officers couldn’t agree more.

Most phone calls come from experienced PIs who need the least help, says Dr. Harold Perl, former senior lead PO in behavioral research, dissemination and training, Clinical Trials Network at NIH’s National Institute on Drug Abuse.

“They know how important it is to establish and maintain a relationship with a PO. So it’s not only permissible to call us to ask basic questions, but encouraged.”

How can you plan for and initiate that dialogue? Consider the following:

1. Reach out when you’re just formulating the idea

“The best time to call a PO is when you’re just thinking of an idea,” says Perl. “That’s when the most experienced ones call us. When the application deadline is two weeks away, it’s usually too late for us to help.”

Reasons: “We can give you direction, advice — even suggestions for potential collaborators,” says Perl. “We may know someone nearby — sometimes at your own institution — who could be a viable collaborator.”

2. Consider a “concept paper”

Although some PIs may call POs they know with the germ of an idea, both Perl and Senn say writing a concept paper is a good idea, too. Use it to structure and clarify your thinking on how your research will mesh with the agency’s goals. The advantage is that it gives the PO something in writing, making it easier for them to follow your thinking, get all the details and suggest any revisions. Offer to send it to them after an initial e-mail contact. In this simple paper, “state the problem,” explains Perl. “Begin with a brief rationale, add a few sentences about your basic research question and how you plan to answer it. It’s essentially the abstract of your NIH application — but with a little more detail on methodology.”

This also assists the PO to stay abreast of the latest developments: “Even if I’m an expert in a particular area of science, I would presume the applicant has more knowledge about the specifics of his research, and I want to get up to speed on what his ideas are,” says Perl.

3. Identify the right PO

“Sometimes, you don’t know whom to contact,” says Perl. “We are frequently asked for help in getting to the right person.”

Two suggestions:

- Ask your colleagues doing similar work who their POs are or who at the agency they typically work with, says Perl. Even if that’s not the right PO for your project, it’s a starting point. “It might be the PO down the hall, but I can direct you,” explains Perl.
- Look at the NIH (www.nih.gov) or NSF (www.nsf.gov) Website to get within range of the right person. For example, each NIH institute or center has a list of contacts for researchers. On the National Cancer Institute (NCI) Website, for instance, you can click on “Grants and Training” and choose “Research Program Contacts” within the drop down box. This takes you to a contact list broken down by area of research.

“Every NIH institute has a different mission,” says Perl. “Look at the mission statements and organization charts to determine which institute addresses your area of science.” Perl notes, however, that you still need to follow up with contact to make sure you have the right PO. “A lot of time, PIs are doing multidisciplinary work, and there may be some overlap among institutes or POs. Directly ask, ‘Are you the right person who manages this area of science?’”

And once you find the right person, make the first contact. Both Perl and Senn recommend the same approach. “Write an e-mail and ask for a convenient time for a follow-up call,” says Senn. Offer to send the concept paper and set up an appointment.

4. Look for any signals that you're not quite on track

Listen to questions the PO may ask. They won't give you a definitive answer, Senn says, but they will offer suggestions, advice and ask questions to see if what you're doing meets the agency's approval criteria. These questions will also give you a sense of where you might tweak your idea.

Example: "Say there's an NSF solicitation out there, and the agency is looking for transformative ways to teach stem cell education in high school," says Senn. "You may have done previous research in that area and would like to expand on it. The PO might ask you: Does the expansion of your research qualify as transformative?"

"You may get signals that the PO is concerned that your idea might be more incremental than transformative," Senn says.

One such signal might be in the form of a question like this: "How would this transform the field — as opposed to adding to what's already being done?"

5. Remember that the official documents and Web material aren't always the final say

Although you certainly do want to review an agency's published material as a starting point, be aware that some things may have changed since it was written.

"There are always micro-adjustments, such as what funds are available, the current state of the agency's portfolio," explains Perl. "For example, say an institute is already funding 20 projects in one slice of science. They are unlikely to fund another. They would rather look at something that is complementary to balance out the portfolio."

Perl suggests you directly ask the PO a question like: "Are there any new considerations? What area of science is your branch really focusing on right now, or the next fiscal year, or the next two years?" ■