

Tips for Communicating with Program Officers

NIH Program Officers oversee an Institute's or Center's grants portfolio and serve as advocates and as a resource for applicants. They have a vested interest in helping researchers submit quality proposals. To assist investigators initiate and maintain productive relationships with Program Officers, below are tips regarding what to say – and not say – to Program Officers (*excerpted from Michael J. Spires* advice in [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)*).

DON'T...	DO...
<p>Cold-call a Program Officer. Program Officers are always busy. Unless you have a well-established relationship with a Program Officer, avoid cold calls.</p>	<p>Send an email request. Send a short email to ask the Program Officer to call or email you back within the next few days.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide your grant number. • Briefly explain why you are getting in touch. • Clearly describe what you want and when you need it. If it's urgent, indicate the urgency in your subject line. • Mention dates that you will or will not be available • Provide alternative email addresses or phone numbers.
<p>Wait until the last minute. Keeping in mind that Program Officers are busy, do not wait until you have drafted your proposal to contact the Program Officer.</p>	<p>Contact the Program Officer early in the planning stage of your project. Provide important advice and feedback regarding the relevance of your ideas to NINR's mission or to the objectives of a particular funding opportunity.</p>
<p>Provide overwhelming detail. Avoid burying the Program Officer in methodological details or the minutiae of your literature review.</p>	<p>Concentrate the big picture in a 1-2 page concept paper. Stick to the major points of your research plans and potential proposal ideas, especially the expected outcomes and deliverables. Communicate them as clearly as possible. Program Officers are scientists, but may not have the same area of expertise as you do. Attach the concept paper to your email.</p>
<p>Ask questions that are easily answered by reviewing the program guidelines and/or the funding announcement. If you need clarification, first contact the SOPH Grants Management Office (5-4771).</p>	<p>Demonstrate that you have taken the time to review the program guidelines. Ask questions that focus on the big picture. Program Officers are scientists, but may not have the same area of expertise as you do. Do not bury them in too much detail.</p>
<p>Stop communicating with the Program Officer if your proposal is not funded. Program Officers may be able to guide you toward other funding mechanisms better suited to your project.</p>	<p>Contact the Program Officer to discuss your summary statement, especially if you plan to resubmit. Many Program Officers attend peer review meetings and can provide critical feedback to inform your resubmission strategy.</p>
<p>Miss opportunities to network with program officials. Building a successful research career depends not only on good science, but on good communication skills as well. Seize opportunities to network with program officials, particularly those affiliated with institutes or centers whose research missions closely align with your work.</p>	<p>Take advantage of networking opportunities. Make time in your schedule (and budget) to attend scientific meetings and use these opportunities to network with program officials and individuals that sit on study sections.</p>

*Michael J. Spires is the Research Development Officer at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

Helpful Link: [Contacting Staff at the NIH Institutes and Centers](#)

Helpful Articles

[What to Say – and Not Say – to Program Officers.](#) Spires, Michael. "What to Say – and Not Say – to Program Officers." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. March 2012.

[Can We Talk?](#) Porter, Robert. "Can We Talk? Contacting Program Officers." *Research Management Review*. Fall/Winter 2009; 17(1) 1-8.

[A View from the NIH Bridge: Perspectives of a Program Officer.](#) Zatz, Marion. "A View from the NIH Bridge: Perspectives of a Program Officer." *Mol Biol Cell*. August 2011;22(15) 2661-2663.

White Paper: Build Strong Relationships with Your NIH and NSF Program Officers. Principal Investigator Leader. [Download](#)