Writing Winning White Papers for Maximum Impact

Prepared for Temple University

Writing Winning White Papers

Introduction: Background and Context

Function: How White Papers Work

Merit: What Makes a Strong White Paper

Practice: Drafting a White Paper

Use: How to Sell a Project with a White Paper

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Presenter: Rebecca Huenink, Senior Grants Consultant

Rebecca joined Hanover as a Grants Consultant in 2013. She has more than a dozen years of experience developing winning projects and proposals to help educational institutions and public benefit organizations succeed. Her experience includes project design, fundraising, and grant development for individuals and organizations across the United States. Rebecca has a special focus on helping grantseekers build and cultivate fruitful long-term relationships with funders.

Introductions

Who is here today?

Briefly share:

- What is your grantseeking background?
  - Are you new to grants? Very experienced?
  - What types of grants have you applied for or received?
- What is your experience with white papers or concept papers?
  - Have you drafted white papers or concept papers?
  - Have you used them to "sell" a project to a funder?
- What do you hope to get out of the white paper session today?

Thank you for sharing—this information helps Hanover tailor the presentation to the needs of the group.
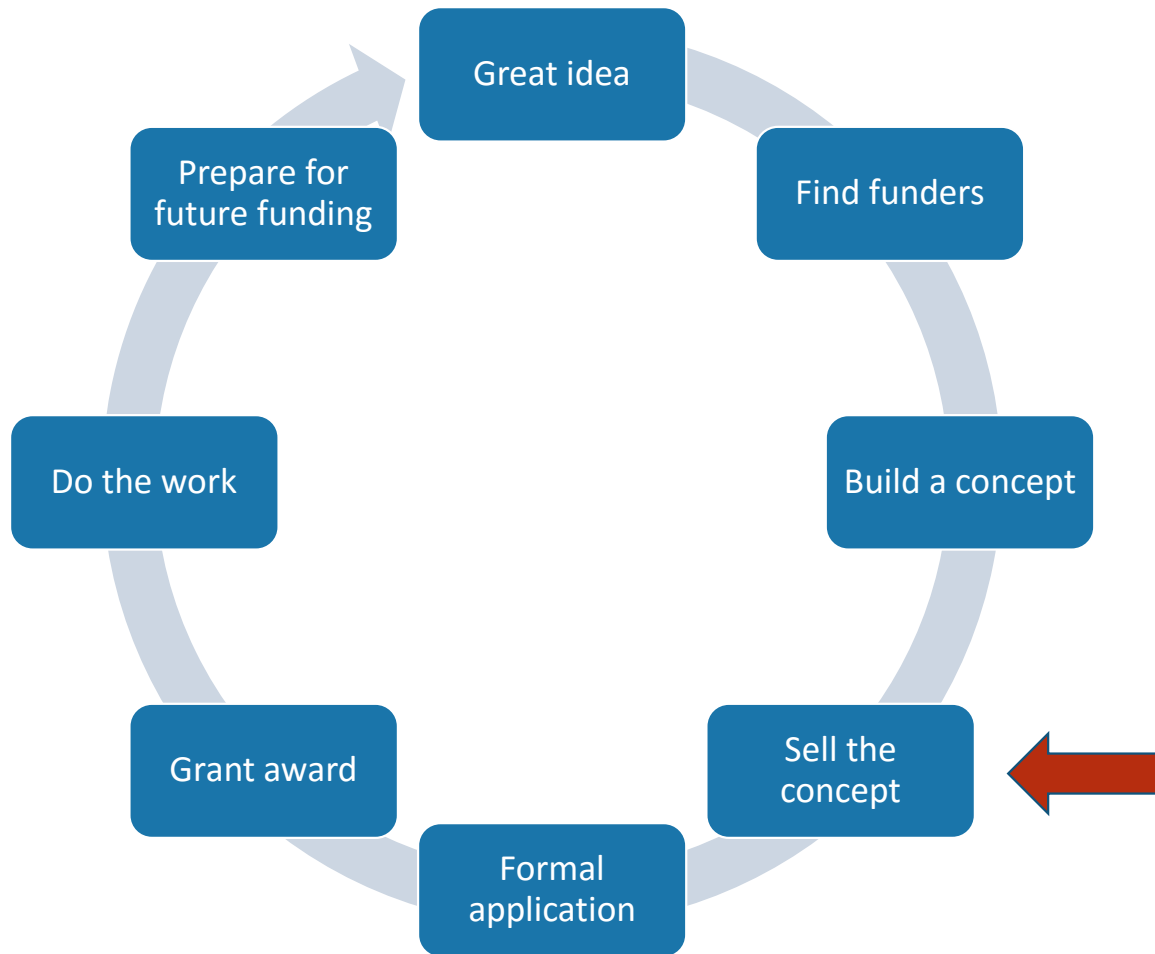
Definitions: What is a grant?

A grant is a contract to perform work that advances the funder's mission.

A grantmaker pays a grantee to **produce something of value** *to the grantmaking organization. For example:*

- A change in the world

- A solution to a problem

- An answer to a question

- A service to a community

- A new or better way to accomplish something

- Publicity or enhanced reputation for the funder

Grantmakers don't award grants just because they like you: a grant is a transaction in which a grantmaker pays for a product or result.

The Grant Process: White Papers in Context

Great idea

Find funders

Build a concept

Sell the concept

Formal application

Grant award

Do the work

Prepare for future funding

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Writing Winning White Papers

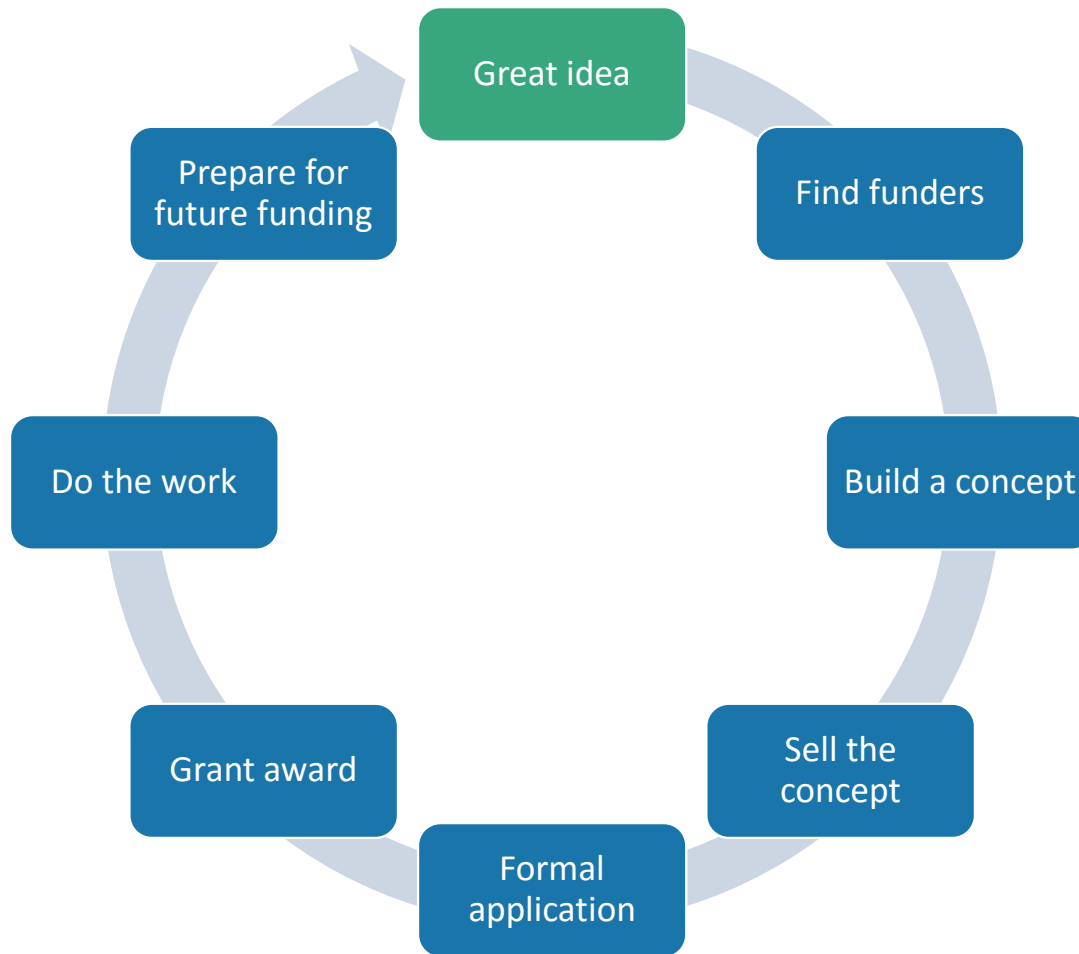Introduction: Background and Context

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The Grant Process

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What makes a grant idea competitive?

To be competitive for grant funding, you need to have an exciting idea.

A competitive grant idea:

- Fills a demonstrable gap (e.g., in services or knowledge)
- Is innovative and interesting to people in the field
- Produces something of value within a specified timeframe
- Has a strong, measurable impact
- Is timely

If people in your field get excited about your idea, you are on to something.

Idea Development: Define the Gap

A great grant idea fills a key gap that is hindering your field.

Ask:

- What are the most important challenges in my field right now?
- What is missing that could help advance the field?
  - Is it a tool? What kind?
  - Is it knowledge? What knowledge, specifically?
  - Is it a program model?
  - Is it implementation of existing models?
  - Is it evaluation of current implementations?

Articulate the key gaps in your field as clearly as possible.

Idea Development: Define the Impact

Great grant ideas are high-impact.

With your field's key gaps in mind, ask: "If I filled this gap…."

- What would be the impact on my own work?

- What would be the impact on my students?

- What would be the impact on the field?

- What would be the impact on society?

Your idea's impact is what grant funders would get for their money.

A Good Idea vs. a Grant-Fundable Idea

A good idea:
- Helps someone
- Advances an important agenda
- Serves a wise/substantial purpose
- Creates interest
- Involves growth or learning
- Can have undefined steps or processes
- Builds something of value
- Has form that follows function
- Can be of any scale
- Can be a one-time effort

A fundable idea:
- Addresses the funder's target audience
- Advances the funder's agenda
- Serves a wise/substantial purpose
- Aligns with funder priorities
- Measures/analyzes growth and learning
- Must have a clear path from A to B to C (with limited exceptions)
- Builds something of value
- Fits in a pre-set spectrum of activity types
- Is scaled by prior experience and to the budget
- Should be replicable

More information: Helping Faculty Differentiate Between the Good and the Fundable

Exercise: Articulate a Grant Idea

Take a moment to list some potential grant ideas.

Note:

- What gap will you fill?

- What is the potential impact of your idea?

- Is this idea exciting, innovative, and timely?

Find a partner and take turns presenting your ideas. Help each other assess and prioritize ideas. Which ones should you find funders for?

Exercise Debrief: Grant Ideas

Share your observations on the grant idea brainstorming exercise.

- Were there ideas that clearly stood out as competitive?

- Were there ideas that were murky or needed further development?

- Were there ideas that didn't seem like a good fit for grantseeking?

- Did you learn anything new about the potential grant competitiveness of your project ideas?

The Grant Process

Great idea → Find funders → Build a concept → Sell the concept → Formal application → Grant award → Do the work → Prepare for future funding

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Finding Funders

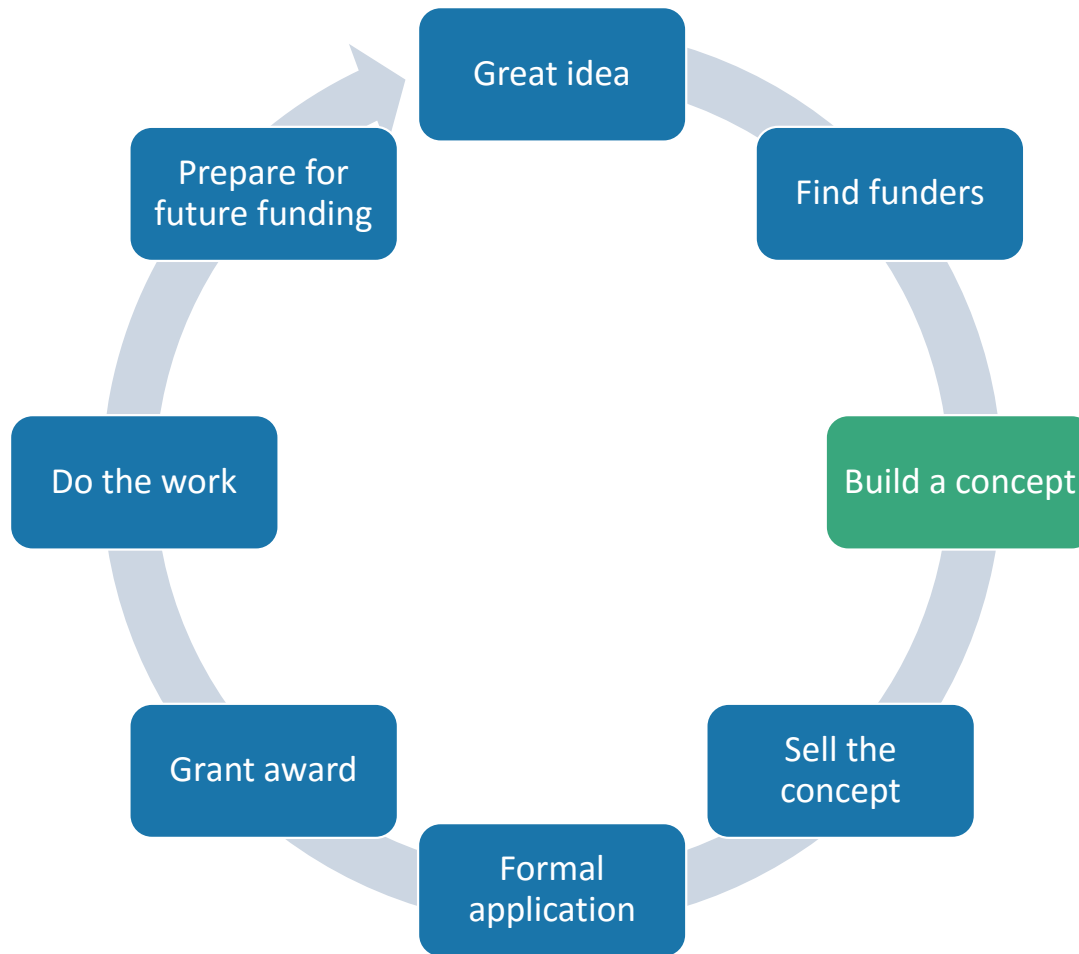*Prospecting is the art of matching grant ideas with likely funders.*

Prospecting should be undertaken:

- Carefully

- Thoughtfully

- Critically

- With as much information as possible

Careful prospecting saves time, effort, and suffering.

(Grants submitted to inappropriate prospects can lead to wasted effort or implementation headaches.)

The Grant Process

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- Build a concept
- Sell the concept
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- Grant award
- Do the work
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Build a Rock-Solid Concept: Something to Sell

Grants are transactional: you have to have something to sell. We call that something a "concept."

A grant concept includes:

- A clear product
  - Relevant to the funder's interests and priorities
  - Impactful and exciting in the context of your field
- A logical plan
  - A clear, basic sketch of how you will get from A to B
  - Answers to key questions about feasibility

A strong concept makes the funder say "Let's do this!"

Take a moment to select a project idea to build out into a concept.

Align the Concept: Fill a Gap

The first step in concept development is to articulate in detail how your project fills a key gap in your field.

- What is the key gap (in knowledge, programs, tools, services) in your field that your project will address?

- How will you address the selected gap?

- What specific results of your work will fill the gap?

- How is this work different from work already underway?

- What concrete impact will your work have on the field?

Build on the work you did at the idea stage to make your concept relevant and impactful.

Take a moment to make notes on the gap your project will fill.

The Product: Articulate a Goal

Articulate an overarching goal that shows how your work will fill the gap.

The overall goal will be presented differently in different fields.

- To fill a gap in knowledge, articulate a clear, specific research question.

- To fill another type of gap, clearly articulate the intended impact, and the product that will lead to that impact.

- Always make sure that the achievement of the goal will lead directly to filling the identified gap in the field.

The goal should be interesting and exciting to those knowledgeable about your field.

Take a moment to articulate your project goal.

Structure: How will you reach your goal?

***Good structure makes a project competitive.***

Answer the following questions, in general terms:

- What resources will you need to accomplish the goal?

- Who will work on the project?

- What will you do?

- What results do you expect?

- What impact do you hope to have if you accomplish your goal?

Put the answers in a table or chart to show how the project logically flows.

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A logic model is a visual demonstration of project structure.

Resources → Activities → Results → Impact
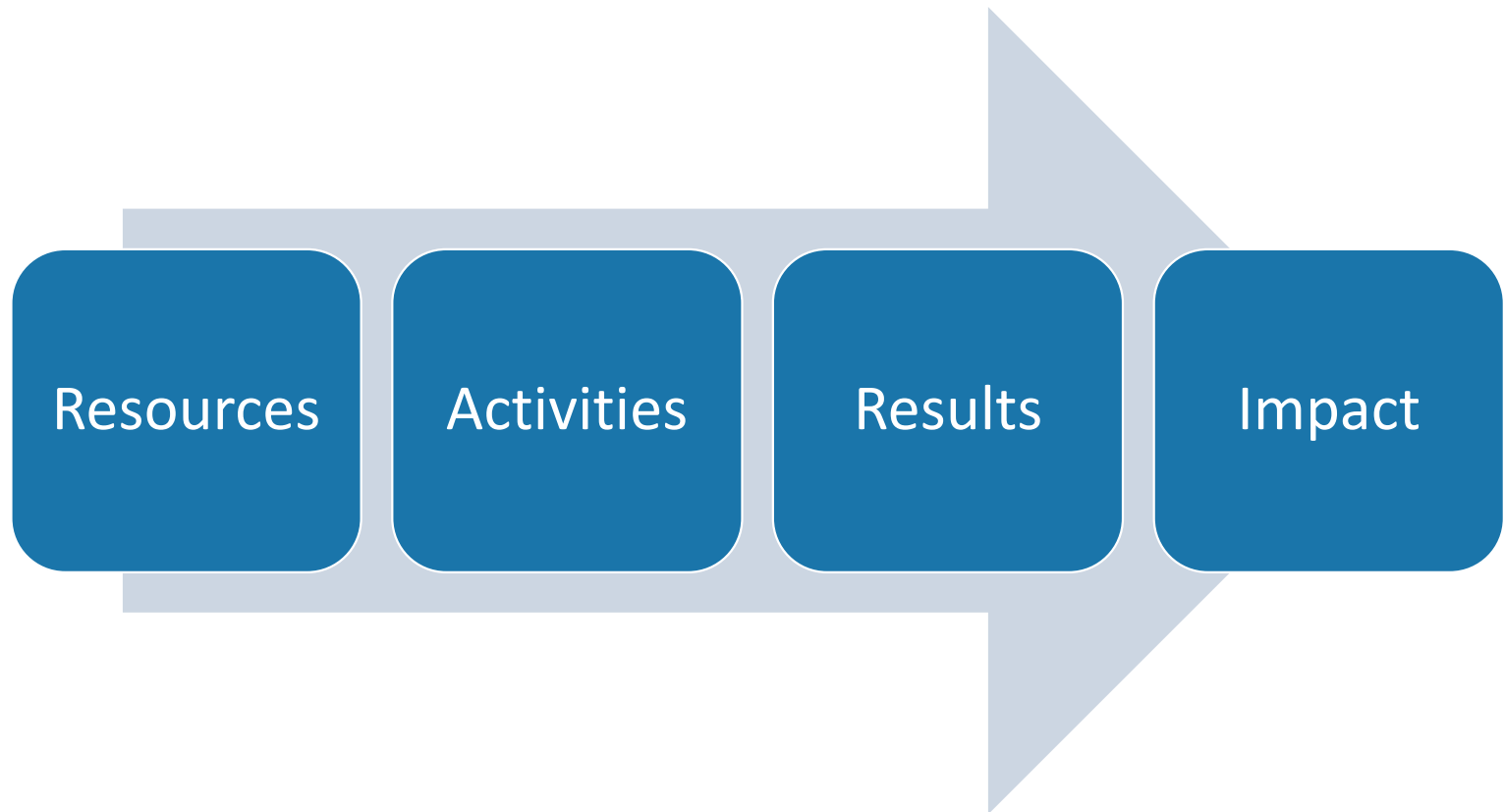
Exercise: Create a Project Structure

Build a logic model to show how you will accomplish your project goal, beginning at the end, with impact.

- What impact do you want your project to have?
- Given the impact you want to have, what results will you need?
- What activities will create those results?
- What resources will you need to conduct those activities?

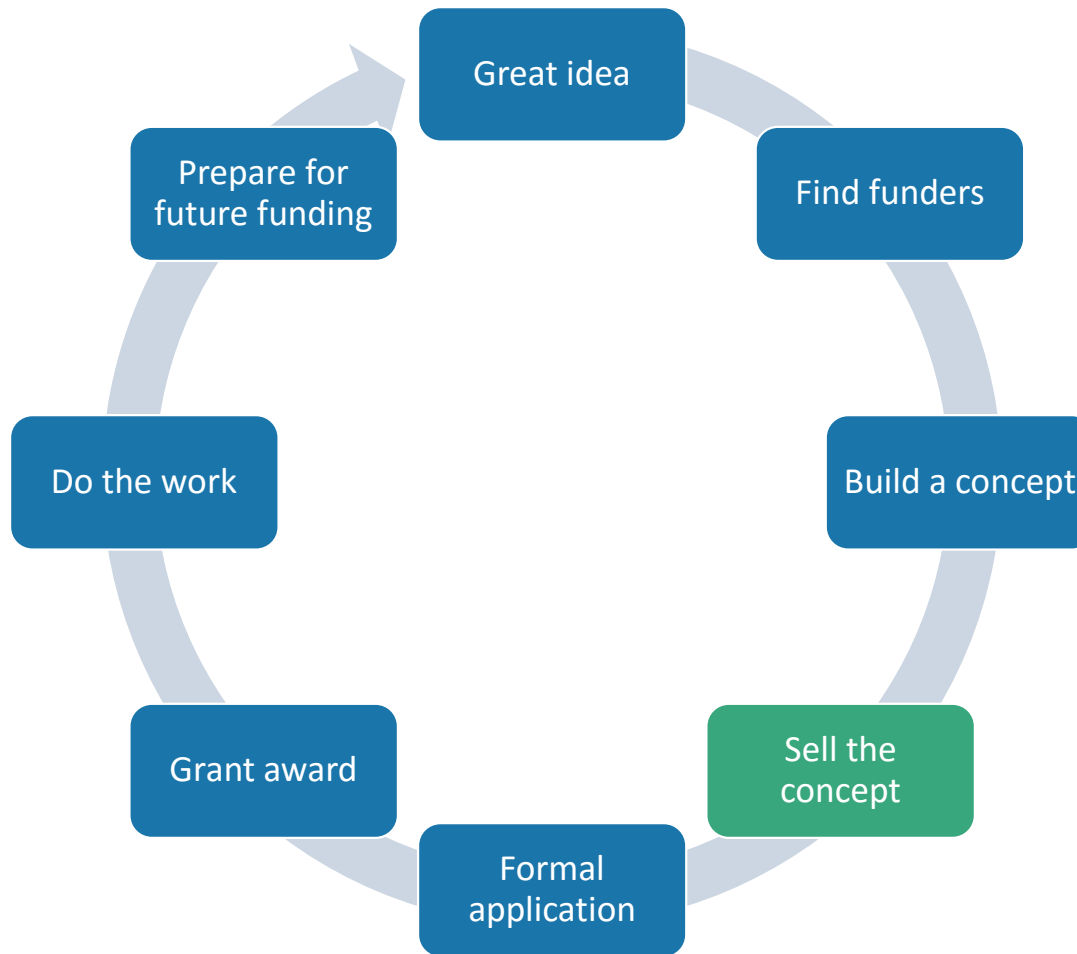| Resources	Activities	Results	Impact

Exercise Debrief: Concept Structure

Share your observations on the concept structure exercise.

- Did starting with impact change anything about your project structure?

- Did you identify any needed resources that you hadn't thought of yet?

- Are there aspects of your project structure that will need further clarification?

The Grant Process

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Selling the Concept

Once you have a concept, you need to sell it to funders.

Selling the concept allows you to:

- Spark the funder's interest
- Build your reputation with the funder
- Assess fit and likelihood of funding
- Get feedback on project design
- Develop a long-term funder relationship

The selling process looks very different depending on the type of funder.

Craft a Compelling Pitch

The "selling" stage is essential to successful grantseeking.

- There is a misconception among grantseekers that selling happens primarily at the proposal stage. **This misconception leads to innumerable failed proposals and frustrated grantseekers.**

- Many funders prefer to provide feedback and **help guide the project development process well in advance of proposal submission**.

- In most cases, you need to sell your project to the funder before you submit a proposal. The proposal provides details and allows for thorough review, but (with key exceptions) **a full proposal should not be the first time a funder hears of your project.**

A white paper or concept paper introduces your project to funders.

Paper Pitch: The White Paper or Concept Paper

The terms *white paper* ***and*** *concept paper* ***are often used interchangeably.***

Differences in terminology:

- **White paper** is a general term for a document that makes a case for something (e.g., a grant project).
  - Grant funders may use the term "white paper" to refer to a specific type of formal preliminary proposal (this terminology is used at the Department of Defense) or an informal "paper pitch" like a concept paper.

- **Concept paper** is a term used in grantseeking to refer to a document that introduces a project to potential funders or collaborators before the formal proposal process begins.
  - Note that some funders may have a formal "concept paper" process as well.

A concept paper is a specific type of white paper.

Developing a Concept Paper

To sell your project to funders, develop a short concept paper.

- A concept paper may be generic or tailored to a particular funder.
  - If you are targeting a major funder (e.g., a federal agency or large foundation), tailor the concept paper to the funder's structures and styles.
  - If you plan to shop your project to multiple smaller funders (e.g., smaller foundations or corporate funders), create a short, generic concept paper to serve as a basis for outreach and letters of inquiry (LOIs).
- Depending on the project and funder, a concept paper may be 1-5 pages.

Remember that the concept paper is a starting point for conversation with funders.

The Generic Foundation Concept Paper

To introduce your project to smaller funders, keep it short and sweet.

Create a 1-2 page document including the following sections:

- Summary (1-2 sentences)
- Need for the Work (1-2 paragraphs)
- Goals and Objectives (list)
- Activities (1-2 paragraphs)
- Impact (1-2 paragraphs)
- Qualifications (1 short paragraph)

The concept paper can be used as the basis for a Letter of Inquiry (LOI) or as a starting point for conversation with foundation staff.

The Detailed Federal Agency Concept Paper

For a detailed federal agency concept paper, follow the outline of the funder's requirements or their usual proposal structure.

If no structure is provided, consider including the following key components:

- Introduction

- Purpose/Need/Significance

- Goals/Objectives/Aims/Research Questions

- Project Description, including Methods and Timeline

- Expected Outcomes/Benefits/Impact (may include Evaluation)

- Budget/Needs & Requested Support

- Contact Information

The Agency-Specific Summary Approach

For federal agencies, grantseekers may prefer to provide a 1-2 page summary of the proposed project in a format that is familiar to the agency.

Examples:

- NSF Project Summary
  - Overview
  - Intellectual Merit
  - Broader Impacts
- NIH Specific Aims
  - Introduction
  - Proposed Solution
  - Aims
  - Significance

Introduction

The Concept Paper's Introduction introduces the project and the document.

The reader of the Introduction should understand:

- What they are reading

- Why they are reading it

- What they can expect to find in the document

- How the project is interesting and relevant to their program

The Introduction should immediately catch the reader's attention.

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Purpose / Need

The Concept Paper's Purpose or Need section specifies the gap your project will fill or the problem you will solve.

The reader of this section should understand:

- The nature of the gap or problem you will address

- Why the gap or problem is important

- The relevance of the gap or problem to the funder's interests

- What has been done to address the gap or problem so far

The Purpose section should inspire the reader: they should really want to solve this problem.

Goals and Objectives

The Concept Paper's Goals and Objectives section specifies exactly what you hope to achieve with your project.

The reader of this section should understand:

- Your goal, and how it will fill the gap or solve the problem
- Your objectives, and how they will lead to achieving your goal

The Goals and Objectives section should reassure the reader with its clarity and good organization.

The Concept Paper's Project Description section should describe your specific plans to achieve your goals.

The reader of this section should understand:

- Your approaches to achieving your goal

- The tools and methods you will use

- The who, what, when, where, why, and how of project implementation
    - Note that this will not contain as much detail as a full grant proposal

The Project Description section should make the reader feel confident that your project is well thought-out and feasible.

Impact / Outcomes / Benefits

The Concept Paper's Impact section should describe how the results of your project will solve the problem or fill the gap that you articulated earlier.

The reader of this section should understand:

- The specific results of the project that will fill the gap or solve the problem
- The potential impact of filling the gap or solving the problem
  - On your field
  - On your students
  - On society

The Impact section should motivate the reader: they should want to make this happen ASAP.

Budget Needs

The Concept Paper's Budget section should describe the funding you will need to accomplish the project.

The reader of this section should understand:

- How much the work will cost
- What other resources will support the work
- How much you need from the funder

The Budget section should bring the reader into your project and show them how they can take the next step to make it happen.

Note that it is not always appropriate to include monetary information in a concept paper: explore funder norms and needs before including.

TAKE A SHORT BREAK.

WE WILL RE-CONVENE IN 15 MINUTES.

Writing Winning White Papers

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Tips for an Effective White Paper or Concept Paper

A concept paper is an "elevator speech"—spark the funder's interest!

Tips for a successful concept paper:

- Highlight key areas that are likely to capture a funder's attention.

- Use the funder's terms and vocabulary.

- Use a tone and writing style appropriate for the funder.

- Focus on need and impact.

- Include enough detail that the funder knows you are serious.

- Balance selling and telling: the ratio of selling to telling will be higher in a concept paper than in a final grant proposal.

- Especially for private funders, use emphasis (**bold**, <u>underline</u>, *italic*) judiciously to bring the reader's attention to key elements—funders often scan concept papers and letters of inquiry quickly!

Concept Paper Pitfalls

Avoid common concept paper pitfalls.

- **Verbosity:** concept paper language should be simple and streamlined.

- **Burying the lede:** the reader should understand right away what the concept paper is about.

- **Language mismatch:** overall tone and specific vocabulary should be appropriate for the funder.
  - Avoid dry, technical language for a mission-driven funder.
  - Avoid cheerleading, sales-type language for a technical funder.
  - Avoid using another funder's terms (e.g., NIH specific aims vs. NSF objectives).

- **Information overload:** include enough detail, but not so much that it overwhelms (remember: this is an introduction to the project).

- **Gaping holes:** address all major feasibility and rationale questions.

Review the concept paper sample provided.

Does the paper:

- Inspire the reader?

- Make the reader want to solve the problem?

- Show how achieving the goal will solve the problem?

- Assure the reader that the proposer has a plan that will achieve the goal?

- Convince the reader that the proposer should do the project?

- Make the reader want to fund the project?

Review the paper according to the criteria provided in the handout. What aspects of the concept paper work well? What aspects don't work well?

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Exercise: Draft a Concept Paper

Using the templates provided, draft a concept paper to "sell" the concept you developed earlier in the workshop.

Remember:

- Be clear and straightforward.

- Keep your specific funder in mind.

- Convey your excitement in an appropriate way.

- Emphasize your project's impact.

We will review our drafts together in 30 minutes.

Exercise: Review a Concept Paper

Find a partner, review each other's concept paper drafts, and provide feedback.

Does the paper:

- Inspire the reader?

- Make the reader want to solve the problem?

- Show how achieving the goal will solve the problem?

- Assure the reader that the proposer has a plan that will achieve the goal?

- Convince the reader that the proposer should do the project?

- Make the reader want to fund the project?

Review the paper according to the criteria provided in the handout, and provide specific, actionable feedback for draft revision.

Exercise Debrief: Draft and Review a Concept Paper

Discuss the concept paper drafting exercise.

Reflect:

- Did you make progress on your draft?

- Did your partner provide useful feedback?

- What do you need to do to make the paper final?

- Are there areas that were particularly challenging?

- What are your next steps for your concept paper?

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Writing Winning White Papers

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Use: How to Sell a Project with a White Paper

With a white paper or concept paper in hand, you are ready to connect with funders. This is an essential step: <u>for many opportunities, it is not worth submitting a proposal if you have not first connected with a Program Officer</u>.

Connecting with a funder at the concept stage allows you to:

- Introduce yourself, your work, and your concept.

- Solicit feedback on project alignment and funder interest.

- Verify funder priorities and preferences.

- Build your reputation with the funding agency or organization.

- Develop a long-term relationship to facilitate future funding.

Note that some funders prefer not to have contact before a formal proposal or letter of inquiry—always respect funder communication preferences.

Connect with Public Funders

Connecting with a Program Officer at a public funder (e.g., a federal agency) is a fairly straightforward process.

Always follow the agency's preferred practice. A general guide:

- Reach out and introduce yourself via email first.

- Ask for a meeting, on the phone or in person.

  - Note that some POs prefer not to meet in person.

- If the PO prefers to answer questions via email, go with that.

Keep your communication with the PO professional and respectful: remember, you are building your reputation.

Sample email to a Program Officer:

Subject: Request for call to discuss XXX due on DATE

Dear Dr. X:

I am interested in submitting a proposal for RFA #XXX "RFA Title" and would like to schedule a call with you to discuss whether my research is appropriate for this opportunity. [If your request is urgent, indicate that here and explain why.]

[Briefly describe your proposed work and why you think it is a good fit.] If it would be helpful, I can provide a [brief concept paper / project summary / specific aims] for you to review prior to our call. [If you have specific questions that you want the PO to consider, include them here.]

[Provide possible days/times *or* indicate that you can be available at the PO's convenience.]

Thank you in advance for your assistance. I look forward to talking with you soon.

Contact Information

Connect: Meeting with a Program Officer

Always prepare questions before your meeting with the Program Officer.

Common questions:

- Is this project a good fit / competitive for this opportunity / your funding priorities?
- Are there other opportunities that would be a better fit?
- What are your recommendations for improving the fit / competitiveness?
- What other recommendations do you have?
- What are the most common causes for proposals being declined for this opportunity?
- What are the usual success rates for this program?
- What is your preferred method for me to contact you if I have additional questions?

Remember to spend as much time listening as talking: POs can provide very valuable feedback and guidance. They know what they're talking about!

Always follow up after meeting with a PO, and send questions as soon as they arise in the proposal development process.

- Follow up with an email thanking the PO for their time and summarizing the key points you took away from the call.
- In any future communication about this opportunity, reference your call.
- Use the subject line of your email to reflect the purpose and urgency of the request.

Remember that Program Officers are very busy: make things easy for them with <u>clear, specific, actionable communication</u> and a courteous tone.

Connect with Private Funders

Connecting with private funders (e.g., foundations, corporations) can be a bit "stickier" than connecting with public funders, but it is no less important.

- Private funders are not required to be transparent or straightforward about their processes.

- Private funders often say one thing and do another.

- Private funders are much <u>more likely to award funding to an individual or entity that they know and trust</u>.

In most cases, it is very important to carefully cultivate private funders before applying for a grant.

Cultivate Private Funders

To prepare for cultivation, assess and analyze your connections and potential connections to the target funder and its personnel, as well as opportunities for building additional connections.

- Research your institution's history with the funder.

- Identify organizational and personal connections to the funder, funder personnel, or people and organizations connected to the funder.

- Gather intelligence and/or request introductions from connections.

- Identify online and in-person connection opportunities.

Analyze connection opportunities: What is the best way to build a relationship with this funder?

Cultivate Private Funders

Develop and implement a cultivation strategy for each target funder.

- Reach out to the funder, either through connections or "cold."

- Introduce yourself and your work.

- Gather information on funder priorities and preferences.

- Ask how you might work together.

- Continue the conversation.

Note that for funders with heavy communication barriers, it may be necessary to proceed to a "cold" letter of interest (LOI) as a first step in the relationship development process. In these cases, the LOI is intended to open the conversation. It will likely be declined, but this decline provides an opportunity for communication (e.g., a phone call to ask for feedback on the reasons for the decline), and begins the relationship.

Funder Cultivation: Example 1

A straightforward cultivation process:

1. A colleague provides an **introduction** to a foundation staff member via email: "Hello, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Applicant, who is doing some really interesting work that advances your foundation's mission."

2. The PI follows up on the introduction with an **email** to the foundation staff member, including a summary of her goals, information on alignment with the funder's mission, and a request for a phone conversation.

3. The staff member agrees to a **quick chat**, during which the PI presents an overview of her work and funding needs, and the foundation officer provides information about the foundation's current interests. The officer advises the PI to wait to apply for funding until reaching a different stage in her work.

4. The PI **keeps in touch, and reaches out again** when she reaches the desired stage in her work, to ask about a potential funding application. The foundation officer provides guidance on application strategy and timing.

A less straightforward cultivation process:

1. A PI has no existing connections to the target foundation. He sends a **"cold" email** to the appropriate staff member, introducing himself and his work, and requesting an opportunity to speak on the phone.

2. The PI receives **no response** to the email, so he follows up with a phone call, leaving a short voicemail message for the foundation officer. He receives no response, so he calls a few days later, but does not leave a voicemail.

3. Given the fact that the foundation is an important long-term target for him, the PI decides to submit a **"cold" LOI**.

4. The foundation **declines** the LOI, and the PI **follows up** to request information on the reasons for the decline.

5. The foundation provides information and guidance that inform the PI's project development, leading to the submission of a **second LOI**, which is accepted.

An even less straightforward cultivation process:

1. A PI has **no existing connections** to the target foundation, and the foundation does not accept unsolicited inquiries or communication.

2. The PI identifies an opportunity to cultivate the foundation at a **national conference**.

3. At the conference, the PI engages a representative of the foundation in conversation about her work. The foundation representative shows interest, and they have an **engaging conversation** about the state of the field. The PI and the foundation representative exchange cards and agree to continue the conversation at a later date.

4. The PI follows up with an **email** referring to the conversation at the conference, providing more information about her work, and asking whether there might be an opportunity to partner with the foundation on this work in the future.

5. The representative responds with some information about **current priorities**, which do not perfectly align with the PI's current work.

6. The PI **stays in contact** with the foundation representative on social media and via email, and when her work shifts in a new direction, she again asks about the foundation's interest. This time there is more interest, and she is **invited to apply**.

Funder Cultivation: An Ongoing Process

During the cultivation process, periodically regroup to assess progress, evaluate the relationship, and determine next steps.

- Based on information gathered so far, is this still a good prospect?
  - With new information, re-evaluate:
    - Alignment: Is it still a good fit?
    - Potential: Does the funder have the potential to provide significant support or recognition?
    - Ease of cultivation: How much energy will I need to put into cultivation?
- Is the prospect ready for an "ask"?
  - Have you successfully engaged the funder in conversation about your work?
  - Have they invited you to apply, formally or informally?
  - Does an ask need to be the next step in cultivation?

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The Art of Funder Conversation

A one-sided "pitch" is boring and uncomfortable for both parties. An engaging conversation is much more likely to help you connect.

In an [insightful piece](#) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Kevin Starr, Director of the Mulago Foundation, reflected on cultivating foundation personnel in conversation.

- Three questions to "hit out of the park":
  - *What do you do?*
  - *How does that work?*
  - *But doesn't that…*
- Key tips:
  - Listen
  - Nail your metaphor
  - Have a few key facts that will stick
  - Be an equal
  - Be patient

Exercise: The Art of Funder Conversation

Find a partner for the following exercise:

- Read [The Pitch is Dead. Long Live the Conversation.](#)
- Role play funder conversation in pairs
  - Take turns playing the roles of PI and Foundation Officer
  - As PI, introduce yourself and your work to the Foundation Officer and engage in conversation.

Exercise Debrief: Funder Conversation

Share your observations on the funder conversation exercise.

- Did anything surprise you?

- Did you identify any good conversation "hooks" while talking about your work?

- Were you able to get the "PO" excited about your project?

- Did you identify any challenging topics that will require further preparation before you meet with a funder representative?

Relationships: An Essential Element of Grantseeking

Even in formalized grantseeking structures, relationships are an essential element of the funding process.

- Grantseekers sometimes resist building relationships with funders.
  - It can be challenging to reach out to new people, especially for introverts.
  - In most cases, relationship-building is not part of the "official" required process.
- But <u>without relationships, grantseeking is difficult, if not impossible</u>.
  - A monetary award involves trust; people trust people they know.
  - Grants are awarded in the context of communities; communities are built on relationships.

Remember: Grant funding is a human endeavor; to make it work for you, build strong relationships with the people involved.

Grantseeking Resources at Temple

Temple provides a wealth of internal resources for grantseeking, including resources for white paper development.

- Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR)
  - Pre Award Management
- Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations (CFR)
  - White Paper Guide

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QUESTIONS?

GRANT DEVELOPMENT CENTER

HR HANOVER
R E S E A R C H

CONTACT

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